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MARGARET ATWOOD AND THE POLITICS OF CONSUMPTION

BY

JANNIE STAFFORD EDWARDS (C)

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled **Margaret Atwood and The Politics of Consumption** submitted by **Jannie Stafford Edwards** in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of **Master of Arts** in **English**.

Nora Stovel
Supervisor

Susan Jaskoll

Dale Wilcox

Date: October 3, 1989

DEDICATION

For Mark, who knows the worth.

ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood, in her first three novels, *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, and *Lady Oracle*, explores the complex interrelationships between consumers and what they consume. Food and eating are dramatized as central metaphors for female identity. The female protagonists of these novels are starved for more than food, however. Their quests for identity force them to see their own complicity in shaping the self-limiting and culture-limiting patterns of consumer society. In deconstructing the degraded pastiche of popular culture, Atwood exploits forms of popular fiction (particularly Gothic romances and detective novels) to expose the addictive compulsions engendered by consumerism. Addictive behaviour offers temporary solutions to deeply rooted psychological problems. Similarly, the solutions provided by mass-produced fantasies are false and self-limiting. Atwood diagnoses more than she prescribes. Her diagnosis of cultural pathology outlines a politics of perception to counteract the debilitative aspects of the politics of consumption.

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MARGARET ATWOOD AND THE POLITICS OF CONSUMPTION

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In her first three novels, *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, and *Lady Oracle*, Margaret Atwood gives us three protagonists who must come to terms with being consumers. Each is searching for psychic integration, yet each is complicitous in compromising with a socioeconomic and political system that is exploitive and reductive. Marian McAlpin, the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing*, and Joan Delacourt Foster are lodestones magnetizing a host of auxiliary characters who are, to greater or lesser degrees, also collusive and deluded. Atwood places her characters in a hyper-real consumer culture that fetishizes commodities, reifies the *image* as commodity, is fuelled by an erotic desire for consumption, and is cut off from any meaningful connection with the past. Given all this, how to act is, for Atwood and for us all, the ultimate challenge.

Some critics of Atwood's novels have tended to see the protagonists as exemplifying psychological types. In *Margaret Atwood* (1984), Jerome Rosenberg suggests that the protagonists of Atwood's first three novels each have "a particular clinical syndrome[:] . . . For Marian, it is anorexia nervosa; for the woman in *Surfacing* it is amnesia; for Joan, it is suggestive of something like multiple personality disorder" (116). Elspeth Cameron, following Rosenberg's approach, provides a thorough clinical case study of Marian in *The Edible Woman* as an anorexic.[1] Whether we label

these first three Atwood protagonists amnesiac, compulsive personalities, or schizophrenics, it is clear they are all paranoid—fearful of being taken over by others. Although readers may recognize the protagonists as psychological types, psychological labelling is less valuable than an awareness of how they are shaped by the world in which they live. Atwood's characters are neither individuated essences nor autonomous wholes but psychological spaces in which social, mythological, and cultural forces meet.

The highly allusive connections between theme and genre and the eclecticism of Atwood's interest in popular culture in her work invites diverse critical readings. Judith McCombs, in her introduction to *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood* (1988), catalogues the various critical approaches to Atwood's work. Critics have tended to explore themes and patterns in light of social theories: the theories of R.D. Laing, George Steiner, and other social theorist form the critical underpinnings for these analyses. Feminist readings of Atwood's work such as Barbara Rigney's *Madness and Sexual Politics* (1978) represent another critical way into the Atwood corpus. Eli Mandel ("Atwood Gothic" [1977]) was among the first to identify the Gothic genre as a literary genre on which Atwood improvises. Later criticism used the theories of Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, and Mircea Eliade to examine Atwood's novels and poetry as transformed myth. The theological criticism of Francine du Plessix Gray and Carol Christ in the late seventies introduced yet another critical approach to Atwood's work. As McCombs points out, the linguistic, formal, structural, postmodern, and manuscript approaches are fewer, but, in light of the growing

body of Atwood criticism (at least seven book length works to date), these approaches can be anticipated.

The critical framework used here to explore the theme of the politics of consumption synthesizes the work of popular culture theorists, psychologists, and literary critics. As I have suggested, Atwood's interest in popular culture and the highly connected territory of theme and genre in her work invites such an interdisciplinary approach.

Atwood explores the theme of consumption as it relates to food, mass-produced fiction such as Gothic and detective novels, photographic images, and nature. Atwood dramatizes how patterns of consumption (whether her characters are consuming food, cultural "food for thought," or natural resources) shape perception. In addition, she dramatizes the addictive nature of patterns of consumption.

The ambiguous endings of all three novels bring the protagonists neither to the altar nor to the grave, but to psychological border country that is unmapped for them, or, to use another metaphor, unscripted. Does Marian parody, celebrate, or defy her victimization with her cake effigy? Is the determination of *Surfacing's* protagonist not to be a victim believable, given that she is poised to go back to a civilization that she has diagnosed as not being civil at all? And Joan, for all her resolve to change, seems gearing up to become a nurse figure in the next chapter of her life drama. (After all, as Susan Rowoski has suggested, Joan has the nurse script from Paul's Mavis Quilp nurse novels,[2] and, as Joan herself admits, she is attracted by a "man in a bandage" [LO,345].)

The subtext of collusion that runs through the theme of victimization in Atwood's work has been both challenging and problematic for feminists. While Marge Piercy celebrates and endorses Atwood's diagnosis of the patterns of victimization in an oppressive culture, she resents Atwood's "untenable coyness" about leaving her protagonists in such ambiguous border country as the novels end.[3] It is obvious that Atwood offers little in the way of prescription. Although the narrator of *Surfacing* realizes that it is not enough to diagnose, to name the problems, that she must find a way to live with uncertainties and polarities, Atwood leaves her character poised on the brink of implementing this realization.

The equation between repetitive, mechanistic commodity production consumption and addictive behaviour is a theme that runs through these novels. Repetition is the nexus of the relationships and the individual behaviour patterns of Atwood's characters. And in this nexus lies the essential psychological and sociological impetus that governs Atwood's need to diagnose and to name. Repetitive, addictive behaviour mirrors the *modus operandi* of capitalism. Advertising engenders desire for commodities, yet, in order to maintain economic equilibrium, people must become dissatisfied. I propose to look at some of the repetitive patterns in Atwood's first three novels within the context of both the consumer culture and addictive behaviour.

The protagonists of Atwood's first three novels resist being objectified and consumed by others. As a result, eating rituals become complex symbols that dramatize the struggle for female identity.

How Atwood's characters consume, reject, and prepare food for others forms the basis for eating as a central metaphor for female identity. The work of psychiatrists Hilde Bruch and Lawrence Hatterer which traces the etiology of the eating disorders of anorexia nervosa and compulsive eating forms the theoretical basis for my analysis of food consumption and its relationship to female identity.[4]

I am indebted also to Dorothy Dinnerstein for her analysis of persistent arrangements of gender asymmetry in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (1976). Dinnerstein's analysis provides as a conceptual framework for an analysis of Atwood's thematic preoccupations with male-female and mother-daughter power arrangements. Dinnerstein's analysis of the inherent complicity of both men and women in maintaining power imbalances echoes the analyses of psychiatrists Bruch and Hatterer into the "logic" of addictive behaviour. Atwood dramatizes the destructive relationships between mothers and daughters, between men and women, and between men and nature within a conceptual framework of symbiosis and complicity.

Marian, the narrator of *Surfacing*, and Joan become paranoid, and their paranoia is fuelled by their real and projected fears of being "taken over" and psychologically colonized. The responses of all three protagonists to these fears centre around eating. Marian's body rejects food. The protagonist of *Surfacing* finds certain foods are taboo. For both these protagonists, abstinence from eating precipitates to some degree crises that lead to new dimensions of awareness. Joan becomes a compulsive eater to defy her mother.

Even when Joan loses weight and more readily conforms to the cultural ideal of beauty, she still maintains an internalized image of herself as fat.

How these protagonists deal with eating underscores the fact that no culture deals rationally with food. We do not eat food for its nutritional value alone. Food and eating rituals figure symbolically in all power and prestige systems; all cultures endow food with complex values, ideologies, and religious beliefs. Atwood's concern with eating places her squarely in a tradition of women's culture (or sub-culture) as well as squarely in a tradition of fiction by women. Both fiction and eating have had subversive motivations for women, as Gilbert and Gubar and other feminist revisionist critics have outlined.[5] The eating disorders we find in these three novels—whether we can medically label them anorexia nervosa or compulsive eating—are disturbances which symbolically attempt to solve or camouflage problems which seem otherwise insoluble. They show attempts by the women involved to establish psychological boundaries in order to resist role engulfment, commodification, and victimization.

Atwood's concern with food and eating as a central metaphor for female identity reflects the feminist concerns of the seventies to show how language shapes and reinforces power imbalances. For example, Alleen Pace Nilsen's article "Sexism as Shown Through the English Vocabulary" (1977) examines language to see what it reveals about men and women in our culture.[6] Nilsen notes that passivity is expected of women, and that this is revealed in language. Nilsen offers as proof the fact that women are often

identified in English as something to eat. Girls and women are complimented for "looking good enough to eat" or having "peaches and cream complexions." Slang words for women underscore the symbolic connection between women and food: *cookie, peach, honey, tomato, dish*, and so on. Women's passivity is further liguistically underscored by the metaphors of women as animals. Typically, the connections are with domestic pets or barnyard animals. Young girls and women are *kittens, lambs, bunnies, chicks*, (or, even more disturbing, the metonymic dissociation of women as *beavers)*. When women lose their youth and sexual desirability, they are labelled old *bats, pigs, cows*; when young women stop being *kittenish*, they are often said to be *catty*. The limiting aspect of language for both women and men concerns Atwood greatly, particularly in *Surfacing*, where "language is everything you do" (129).

Food, eating, and consumption imagery abounds in Atwood's first three novels. Marian warns her cake lady effigy: "You look delicious . . . very appetizing. And that's what will happen to you; that's what you get for being food"(270). Those with power, usually men, are often portrayed as predators hunting with cameras and guns, as "Americans" mechanistically consuming Canada, or as Gothic Janus-like figures, alternately threatening and rescuing women. Seeing the desecrated heron crucified by the bogus Americans, the narrator of *Surfacing* realizes that they killed the bird because "it couldn't be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it. Food, slave or corpse—limited choices" (116-117). Animals, plants,

food, and women share the symbolic associations of being consumed in all three novels. However, as I have mentioned, the polarization of victim and victimizer is not as clear cut as it may seem. Atwood's *caveat* about the "totalitarian innocence" (*Surfacing*, 190) of victimhood forms an important theme of these novels.

Hilde Bruch, a pioneer researcher into the etiology of eating disorders, identifies two crucial symptoms of people who suffer from both obesity and anorexia nervosa. These people feel as if they have no identity. They do not feel as if they own their bodies or the sensations of their bodies and, secondly, they do not seem able to distinguish hunger as a biological signal of nutritional need.[7] To put it in another way, people with eating disorders feel as if they do not own their bodies, their hunger, or their destinies.

Bruch traces these dysfunctions to the matrix of the family, particularly to inappropriate maternal response to the child's signals. The mother may adhere to a rigid feeding schedule prescribed by a pediatrician, she may stuff the child with food to keep it passive and quiet, or she may exert inordinate control in all aspects of the child's life—determining what she eats, wears, plays with, who her friends are, and so on. *Lady Oracle* reads, in part, like yet another case study of a compulsive eater, and certainly the psychodrama between Joan and her mother supports Bruch's generalizations about the etiology of obesity. In fact, Susie Orbach, in *Fat is a Feminist Isuue* (1978), quotes from *Lady Oracle* to support and dramatize her analysis of the complexities of food and eating in the mother-daughter relationship (20). In a patriarchal society, women's power is confined to the domestic sphere of

wifehood and motherhood—a sphere in which food and nuturing figure prominently. Because mothers traditionally provide food, concepts of warmth, nurturance, love, and support are inevitably tied up with food. How mothers provide their children with food in response to their demands for it ultimately and profoundly shapes individuals' concepts of self. The battle between Joan and her mother over food in *Lady Oracle* dramatizes the recent clinical research into eating disorders.

Joan's mother is living what Betty Freidan in 1963 called "the problem with no name"—*The Feminine Mystique*. An ambitious woman, she feels trapped in marriage and motherhood, and channels her thwarted ambition into controlling her husband, her daughter, her house, and her social position. Joan's mother's thwarted ambition, her dissatisfaction with her marriage, and her lack of a sense of community create a crucible for psychological dysfunction.

Gilbert and Gubar suggest in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) that women are as starved for food as they are for fiction of their own making (374). As an ironist, Atwood seems more comfortable with criticizing the destructive ideology of the consumer culture (a culture that "feeds" women with unsatisfying images) than with creating visionary alternatives. The politics of consumption in Atwood's novels also encompasses popular fiction. Atwood inverts the conventions of popular Gothic novels in *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* to dramatize the attractions and limitations of the genre for female readers. Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (1982) and Joanna-

Russ's "Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband: The Modern Gothic" (1973) form the theoretical basis for my analysis of Atwood's use of the Gothic novel. John Cawelti's analysis of detective novels in the framework of popular culture (*Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula and Stories as Art and Popular Culture* [1976]) forms the basis for my analysis of Atwood's use of the detective novel genre in *Surfacing*.

Atwood dramatizes how three female characters are shaped by their cultures. In learning how to be feminine, these characters move through myth, fairy tales, social groups that teach conformity such as Brownies and C.G.I.T.(Canadian Girls in Training), mass-produced popular literature such as Gothic romances and murder mysteries, and advertising. These parts shape a discourse whole on what it means to be feminine in contemporary western culture. I am indebted here to Dorothy Smith's analysis of Foucault's concept of discourse (1972) as an ongoing intertextual process.[8] Women have traditionally taken advice on how to be feminine from texts—magazines, mass-produced fiction, soap operas, advertising, etc.—just have men have been influenced by the discourse on masculinity. Boys, like the narrator's brother in *Surfacing*, learn about "good" and "bad" polarities from comic books, while prefeminist girls like the narrator read *True Romance* comics and fashion magazines. The involvement of Atwood's characters in the respective discourses on masculinity and femininity shapes much of the conflict in Atwood's first three novels.

People look to texts for guidance for how to think and behave. When textual models are both individually and socially expansive

and regenerative, as they are potentially in myth, then they can be useful vehicles in the quest for identity. But when the models are themselves products of a complex socioeconomic and political system that is based on consumption, then the scripts and images these models offer do not create the potential for change, but rather the certainty of entrapment.

Marian, Joan, and the narrator of *Surfacing* seek escape in stories; they are drawn to mass-produced images. Marian reads advertising images in bizarre ways. The protagonist of *Surfacing* searches through her own and her brother's scrapbooks for clues to her identity. What the images collected in the scrapbooks reveal provide clues to gender conditioning. Joan binges on movies and food as a teenager, and grows up to become a writer of mass-produced Gothic novels and a highly commodified popular poet. Marian, as a cog in the wheel of Seymour Surveys, a market research firm, helps shape and maintain consumer ideology. The protagonist of *Surfacing* is an "illustrator" rather than an artist. Her anemic illustrations of fairy tales, laundered of color and evil, suit her publisher, who presumably knows what will sell. Joan writes mass-market fiction initially to pay the bills, but she gets so tangled in a maze of conflicting desires and plots that the distinction between art and life becomes blurred.

The seduction of fiction—particularly of popular mass-produced fantasies—has a perverse but logical allure for women in a patriarchal society. Women are socialized to place an ideological empahsis on love, and certainly the myths of popular culture reinforce this ideology. The happy-ever-after utopian promises of

fairy tales, advertising, and mass-produced texts often reinforce passivity and narcissism. Tania Modleski, in *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (1982), proposes a careful psychoanalytic study of mass-produced texts for women, specifically Harlequin romances, Gothic texts, and serialized soap operas. Modleski challenges the Freudian-inspired concept that these texts appeal to women's innate masochism, although the formulae of these texts certainly imply, through the clear message that the highest feminine ideal is the love of a good man, that female selfhood is insufficient.[9]

Why do women like Joan in *Lady Oracle* cling to the self-limiting message of these texts? The approach Modleski takes in examining mass-produced fantasies for women follows the Marxist approach (exemplified by Jameson and Althusser in reaction to the Frankfurt school's canonization of high art) of carefully examining "low" art to find out how it speaks to people on a subconscious level. Modleski agrees with Jameson that mass-produced fantasies arouse anxieties. Women's main anxieties are the fear of not being "chosen" to be loved, the threat of having one's identity engulfed by another, and the challenge of balancing ambition and love, or work and love. But, after stimulating these anxieties, mass-produced fantasies then soothe them with the promise of happy-ever-after endings. The symbolic rewards offered by escapist texts simultaneously reaffirm both the individual and social status quo. As in all neurotic or addictive behaviour, where compulsive activities are pursued as a way of responding to real problems, the solutions offered by both escapist fiction and compulsive behaviour are symbolic, and mask

real, deeply-rooted psychological problems. Significantly, women often become "hooked" on Harlequins and other types of mass market fiction.

I will be using Modleski's schema, specifically the ways in which Gothic novels present a paradigm that reflects female paranoia, most particularly in examining *Lady Oracle*. Fiction, in Atwood's symbolic world, is a mirror that both reflects and distorts reality. In her poem "Tricks with Mirrors," from the collection *You are Happy*, Atwood's speaker is the voice behind the mirror—the voice of the fictionalizer:

> Don't assume it is passive
> or easy, this clarity
>
> with which I give you yourself.
> Consider what restraint it
>
> takes: breath withheld, no anger
> or joy disturbing the surface
>
> of the ice.
> You are suspended in me
>
> beautiful and frozen, I
> preserve you, in me you are safe.
>
> It is not a trick either,
> it is a craft:
>
> mirrors are crafty

As John Berger points out in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), women are socialized to watch themselves being watched (46-47)—a fun-house proliferation of mirrors that "scrolls and festoons" in baroque extravagance in *Lady Oracle*(3). Women are trained to be narcissistic, to watch themselves and reflections of themselves. The

men in Atwood's novels do not escape the inexorable shaping of culture; they too are narcissistic. It is the women in the novels, however, that Atwood places in front of mirrors—watching. Sometimes the mirrors are "real" objects of reflection, and sometimes the mirrors are symbolic. Even other people can become mirrors. The protagonists of these three novels watch others, consciously or unconsciously hoping to find scripts or models that will meaningfully shape their lives. Marian rejects a number of scripts, unable to cast herself in the parts. She rejects Ainsley's predatory shopping for a father for her child, the office virgins' passive Cinderella complexes that keep them waiting to be rescued, Clara's messy, scatalogical, domestic soap opera, the plastic advertising images that surround her, and Peter's *Playboy*/detective novel fantasies of bachelorhood. The narrator in Surfacing watches Anna watching herself. She watches Joe and David lustfully consuming images with their camera. She watches David and Anna's destructive psychic dance, inspired, in part, by Anna's "theology" of murder mysteries—a fictional formula that requires a victim. Joan is perhaps the most compulsive script shopper of these three protagonists. She tries to find a suitable script in the exotica of dancing class, in the normalcy of Brownies and Nancy Drew stories, in the movies of the 50s like *The Red Shoes* in which Moira Shearer chooses the love of a man over her art, and in the formulae of popular fiction. And underlying all of this frenetic, disorienting experience are the archetypal streams of myth and fairy tale. The irony that underlies Atwood's exploration of popular culture is that, for all the protagonists' urgencies towards

self-discovery, the concept of a unified self in a fragmented consumer culture is itself a myth. Mirrors indeed are crafty.

The neurotic behaviour of Atwood's protagonists has its own perverse logic. As psychologist R.D. Laing points out, a "logical" response to a mad culture is neurotic behaviour.[10] All three protagonists are driven beyond the social pale of their cultures: Marian by her Alice-like patterns of anorexic denial; the narrator of *Surfacing* by her refusal to be an "American"—a profound symbol for alienation and exploitation; and Joan by her addictive personality that masochistically seeks escape from her mother's domination through compulsive eating, and then turns to the seduction of Gothic romances. All three protagonists reject the corrupt idealizations of feminity their cultures offer them. But whether they forge new integrated, autonomous identities in the wake of rejection is the subject of much scholarly debate. Atwood, by leaving her protagonists in ambiguous, almost tableaux-like poses at the conclusion of these three novels, avoids prescriptions.

Food, fiction, and the female search for identity are components of a larger whole—not only to diagnose but to live with the polarities of contemporary culture. In her first three novels, Atwood "opens up" the seeing—no small feat in a mass culture that has become a pastiche. I am indebted to social theorists Fredric Jameson and John Berger for their analysis of popular culture as pastiche—an incongruous collection of forms, motifs, and images from various sources. John Berger, in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), discusses this kind of unintentional, random, depthless collage in his analysis of a popular magazine. Images of famine in Africa are

randomly juxtaposed with images of glamour in advertisements. Sociologists Stuart and Elizabeth Ewan (*Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness* [1982]) suggest that our daily encounters with the pastiche of the image world shape a grammar of perception. Susan Sontag in *On Photography* (1977) also explores how photography shapes perception by creating a collector mentality that is compelled by a desire to consume images.

Atwood's deconstruction of the depthless, dehistoricized pastiche of mass culture provokes a greater awareness of its political soullessness. The glittering, high- rise urban settings in *The Edible Woman* provide a surreal setting for Marian's *Alice in Wonderland* adventure. Mirror imagery abounds here (as in the other novels) to reflect Marian's psychic fragmentation. We see an even more sinister process in *Surfacing*, where the American mechanistic disease, spreading into Canada, is turning people into pastiche. Like the slogan and billboard-littered border country between French and English Canada, David is himself a pastiche of Woody Woodpecker laughs, sick jokes, and pseudo-liberated sixties jargon. When the narrator has the power to see past the surface of David's public performances, she sees him as "an imposter, a pastiche, layers of political handbills, pages from magazines, *affices*, verbs and nouns glued on to him and shredding away" (152). She sees him as a "second-hand American" cynically reflecting the cultural dominance of reproduction—a process that appropriates whatever resources are available. We see Atwood's critique of pastiche in

Lady Oracle, where the debased cultural mirror traps Joan in compulsive behaviour.

In her first three novels, Atwood reflects a highly textured information environment cluttered with artifacts and images. Photography, both still and moving, perhaps more than any other medium, has plastered our information environment with images. As Susan Sontag points out in *On Photography* (1977), the camera, and the images it gives us, has fuelled the acquisitive nature of consciousness and created a new grammar and ethics of seeing. Like archaeologists, novelists use photographs for their information content—for what they reveal about people in a particular place and time. Atwood probes beyond photographic artifacts and uses photography to comment on the motivation to acquire images. Atwood's use of photography, particularly in *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, dramatizes how addictive compulsions are engendered by consumer culture.

The photographers in these two novels are men who pursue images (of women and of natural and man-made objects) in a predatory manner. Marian and the narrator of *Surfacing* feel increasingly threatened by the male photographers in their lives: they see them as mechanistic hunters who must be either eluded or stopped. As Susan Sontag points out in *On Photography*:

> The final reason for the need to photograph everything lies in the very logic of consumption itself. To consume means to burn, to use up—and, therefore, to need to be replenished. As we make images and consume them, we need still more images; and still more . . . . The possession of a camera can inspire something akin to lust. And

> like all credible forms of lust, it cannot be satisfied: first, because the possibilities of photography are infinite; and, second, because the project is finally self-devouring. The attempts by photographers to bolster up a depleted sense of reality contribute to the depletion.(179)

This thesis explores the pervasive theme of the politics of consumption in Atwood's first three novels. Chapter Two explores *The Edible Woman* to show how Marian has swallowed the cultural ideology of the consumer culture and how it "sticks in her craw," preventing her from eating. Normal, sensible Marian, the envy of her office mates in that she has made a good catch for a husband, finds her body rebelling and refusing to eat. This is not a planned political act, but rather a case of displacement reminiscent of clinical descriptions of neurotic behaviour. Marian's body is trying to tell her that she will starve on the "perfect" life her culture is handing her. The metaphors of food and eating as symptomatic of female identity are central to this novel. Also important in this novel is the spatial imagery. As I previously mentioned, Atwood's use of parody deconstructs the glittering pastiche of the urban image environment. Peter, who is "ordinariness raised to perfection" (EW,61), reads law books, men's magazines, and detective novels. In Atwood's schema, this kind of reading material symbolizes a particularly destructive ideological frame of reference. Peter is also a photographer. One does not have to read very far into Atwood's writing to realize that the connection between the camera, the phallus, and the gun, is, as Sontag points out, forged by a lust for possession.

In Chapter Three, I carry on the exploration of these central themes as they relate to *Surfacing*. The genre of the detective novel (in both its classical form and in its more recent "hard-boiled" form exemplified by Hammett, Chandler, and Spillane) is, I believe, as central to this novel as the Gothic genre is to the others. We know that Anna reads detective novels and that she is collusive in her victimization. The act of reading *Surfacing* is a detective search in itself because of the unreliability of the narrator. The act of reading mirrors the narrator's detective search for her father. Her father, a believer in nineteenth-century rationality, has left clues that lead the narrator on another search. Like Nancy Drew, the narrator has been well trained for survival by her father. In *Surfacing*, Atwood takes us out of the urban pastiche that framed *The Edible Woman* and into the wilderness. But whether the context is tamed or wild, she shows how characters are governed by ancient patterns that keep them locked in self-destructive cycles of dominance and submission. Atwood shows how the exploitation of "Mother" Nature mirrors the state of male-female relations in contemporary culture. Again, we see the equation made between the camera and the lust for possession.

In Chapter Four, I explore these themes in *Lady Oracle*. As the formulas of the detective novel are central to *Surfacing*, so the Gothic model is central to this novel. Again, we see food and eating symbolising female identity; this time, Atwood takes us back to the matrix for female identity—the mother-daughter relationship. There is a growing commitment on Atwood's part toward the novel as a moral force of social change. As a necessary part of

commitment to social change, diagnosis must precede cure. When Atwood names destructive social patterns, she is unparalleled in comic inversion, in poetic alchemy, and in exploring the junctions between myth and popular culture. In all three novels, Atwood dramatizes the need for a new grammar of perception to counteract the debilitative nature of the politics of consumption.

NOTES

[1] Elspeth Cameron in "Famininity or Parody of Autonomy: Anorexia Nervosa in *The Edible Woman*" (1985) follows this kind of interdisciplinary approach.

[2]Susan Rowoski, "Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*: Fantasy and the Modern Gothic Novel," p. 207.

[3]See Marge Piercy's article "Margaret Atwood: Beyond Victimization," p. 66.

[4]Hilde Bruch, *Eating Disorders*, and Lawrence Hatterer, *The Pleasure Addicts*.

[5]See Ch. 5, "The Power of Hunger: Demonism and Maggie Tulliver" in Nina Auerbach's *Romantic Imprisonment and Other Glorious Outcasts*. See also "The Genisis of Hunger According to *Shirley*" in Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, pp. 372 - 398.

[6]Alleen Pace Nilsen, "Sexism as Shown Through the English Vocabulary," pp. 27-32.

[7]Hilde Bruch, *Eating Disorders*. See Chapter 4, "Hunger Awareness and Individuation," pp. 44-65.

[8]Dorothy Smith, "Femininity as Discourse," pp.39-40.

[9]Tania Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance*, pp.26-31.

[10]R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience*.

CHAPTER TWO

IMPRESSED BY APPEARANCES: THE EDIBLE WOMAN

Beginning her retrospective narrative in *The Edible Woman*, Marian McAlpin ruminates on her sense of misplaced identity: "I know I was all right on Friday when I got up; if anything I was feeling more stolid than usual" (11). Marian's concern echos the perplexed feeling people have when they have lost an item. They mentally retrace their steps, hoping to stumble onto a clue which will help recover the lost article. Marian wants to "find herself," the "stolid," sensible persona she has become used to, yet the irony of life in the consumer culture is that there may be no authentic self waiting to be retrieved at the end of the search. As Gloria Onley points out, "Beyond the mask of the social role lies the paradox of Western culture: a postulated uniqueness of self that may not exist, or perhaps cannot be known, if it does exist."[1] What Marian is looking for is a ghost, an *idea* of self that has been shaped by twenty-some years of living in a consumer culture.

I propose an analysis of how the ideology of consumption and the discourses on femininity and masculinity shape the consciousness of the characters in *The Edible Woman*. Atwood creates characters that, framed by the pastiche of mass culture, become consumers and collectors. Atwood's characters are, as I point out in the introduction, psychological spaces in which social and mythical forces interact. The novel is a search for identity, as

are Atwood's two following novels, *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle*. The characters in *The Edible Woman* have concepts of selfhood that have been shaped by an image environment that is a pastiche, a random collection of images thematically united by utopian promise and the myth of individuality.

An etymological look at the word "consumer" shows the historical shift in the concept of consumption. Originally, the word (from the French) meant to pillage, to exhaust, to use up, to destroy. The old term for tuberculosis, "consumption," echoes a sense of the debilitative aspects of the term. As the world market economy grew from the sixteenth century onwards, however, the term lost its negative connotations and took on more neutral ones. Contemporary connotations of the term consumer reflect a sense of advocacy in protecting "consumer rights."[2]

All the characters in both The *Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* are consumers to a greater or lesser extent. All are socially implicated by the politics of the marketplace, and no one remains untouched by the ideology of consumption. Reminiscent of the romantic mythology that surrounded tubercular consumption in the nineteenth century, the consumptive disease symbolized by Marian's anorexia nervosa in *The Edible Woman* does inspire her to see some of the emotional bankruptcies of consumer ideology.[3] As her physical and emotional resources are consumed, Marian becomes more desperate, but also more inspired. Making a cake effigy and cannibalistically consuming it are not what we expect of stolid, practical Marion. Rather, it is Marion's first creative act. Atwood has called this novel an anti-comedy, however,[4] and the

ambiguity of the ending undermines any romantic, epiphanic gesture on Marian's part.

What we see in this novel is one woman's attempt to come to terms with the discourse on femininity in her pre-feminist culture. The concept of discourse as it originates with Foucault (1972) is defined as an assembly of statements and exchanges among speakers and hearers who may be separated in time and space. These "conversations" are facilitated and mediated by texts, and discourse itself is an ongoing intertextual process. I am indebted here to Dorothy Smith (1988) for her insightful essay "Femininity as Discourse."[5] Acknowledging her debt to Foucault's concept of discourse, Smith explores the concept of femininity as a "complex of actual relations vested in texts" (Smith, 41).

Women have traditionally taken advice on how to be feminine from texts—women's magazines, fashion displays, advertisements, and books—and Marian is no exception. She takes her cues directly from the texts she encounters—ads on the bus, women's magazines, literature—and symbolically from the women and men in her life. She "reads" other women—the "codes" of their costumes, roles and behaviour (which are directly influenced by texts)—and pieces together an understanding of what it means to be feminine. Marian also reads the men in her life. In *The Edible Woman*, the discourse on femininity intersects with a discourse on masculinity and forms the polarities between victim and victor, hunted and hunter, eaten and eater which structure the novel.

"Express yourself" urges the marketplace; yet, ironically, the message is that this can only be accomplished by acquisition. The

imagery of vision (mirrors, cameras, reflections) as it relates to perception symbolically textures the novel. Forming a context for this pattern of imagery is the omnipresent image environment, a giant mirror on which is reflected hyper-real projections of fantasies, fantasies that are reified by mass-produced media. These fantasies are then consumed by people who mirror them in their behaviour. For example, Peter reads a men's glossy magazine, "the kind with lust in pent-houses" (60). He engineers a love-making "scene" with Marian on a sheepskin rug on the floor. Duncan sums up this process: "Production-consumption. You begin to wonder whether it isn't just a question of making one kind of garbage instead of another kind. The human mind was the last to be commercialized but they're doing a good job of it now" (143).

This process of commercializing the human mind reflects the "American disease," a profound symbol that Atwood develops in *Surfacing*, representing a way of perceiving the world that goes beyond national identity. The symptoms of the American disease are alienation, exploitation, polarity, and duplicity. Being infected with the American disease means assuming a mechanized view of how the world works. Alienation is reflected in the polarity between people and nature, and between the city and nature. Both Marian and the protagonist of *Surfacing* are drawn to nature, a return that provides them with vision and psychic strength to go back to the complexities of the city, a process I will discuss in more detail later.

What we see in *The Edible Woman* is a more specific description of the American disease developed in *Surfacing*—specific in the

sense that the novel concentrates primarily on the effects of the image environment, fuelled by the marketing and mass-media industries, on perception and consciousness. The advertising environment surrounds contemporary urban dwellers with a pastiche of images that are perceived as disconnected moments and random incidents. Viewed in isolation, these images seem insignificant. Yet as sociologists Stuart and Elizabeth Ewan point out in *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness* (1982):

> Viewed together . . . as . . . an integrated panorama of social life, human activity, hope and despair, images and information . . . [our encounters with the advertising environment] reveal a pattern of life [and] the structures of perception. (8)

Atwood uses her license for novelistic coincidence to interpret this point dramatically. Having just been warned by Duncan of the dangers of casting herself as a healing, nurturing nurse-like figure, Marian focuses on a bus ad showing a picture of a white capped and gowned nurse holding a bottle of blood and proclaiming "GIVE THE GIFT OF LIFE" (101). In another Gothic-inspired gestalt, Marian connects the underwear ads on the bus with the "Underwear Man," an imposter posing as a official market surveyor for Seymour Surveys, who uses this guise to ask women questions about their intimate apparel. Marian muses: "Perhaps his otherwise normal mind had been crazed into frenzy by the girdle advertisements on the buses: he was a victim of society" (117). That she goes on to suspect Peter of being the Underwear Man shows how distrustful she has become of surface "packaged" appearances.

Marian is no passive victim, however. She is implicated in helping to shape and maintain consumer ideology by her involvement as a market researcher with Seymour Surveys (a corporation with the rather sinister acronym "SS"). She participates in the engineering of social order by organizing groups of strangers into markets of consumers. Marian's job, as part of the "gooey layer in the middle" of the "ice-cream sandwich" hierarchy of Seymour Surveys (in between the dark Satanic mills of the basement "machines" and the "men upstairs") (19), is to link up the isolated experience of individual spectators with the corporate goals of Seymour Surveys and its clients. Strangers can then experience a sense of community as consumers who identify with a particular brand-name commodity.

Marian surveys the marketplace privately, as well as professionally, as she shops for potential roles for herself. As one critic put it, she is Alice in Consumerland.[6] What she reads in each of the roles available to her appalls her, yet she subconsciously mirrors the behaviour of those she consciously condemns. Ainsley's costumed display of predatory innocence to snare a sperm donor for her baby shocks Marian, yet she allows herself to be costumed as a sexually desirable object, who, with her red dress, earrings, and elaborate hairdo, is eventually mistaken for a prostitute. She is uncomfortable around Clara's earth-mother fecundity, yet she tries to mother almost everyone she comes into contact with. She is starved, yet cannot eat. Marian is a victim of the "tyranny of slenderness"[7] that is an ideological subtext of the discourse on femininity in Western culture, and her inability to eat is an attempt

to escape from the rigours of self-actualization by abdicating maturity.8 Marian's character is a paradox that reflects the paradox of choice inherent in consumer ideology.

What this conditioning has groomed Marian (and all the other characters in the novel) for is what American sociologist Erving Goffman calls in his 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Using the perspective of a theatrical performance, Goffman explores the ways by which individuals present themselves and their activities to others, and the ways by which they guide and control impressions. Goffman's guide for success in social transactions is credibility. If others accept and endorse a social performance, then it is successful. Peter, Ainsley, and Lucy (one of the "office virgins" at Seymour Surveys) are the most adept at managing impressions in the sense that others "buy" their acts. Lucy gives a princess-and-the-pea performance of refined sensibilities, fastidiously picking the raisins out of her coffee-break Danish (24). She costumes herself in order to catch a husband, "trailing herself like a many-plumed fish-lure" through expensive restaurants, "hoping that her delicious dresses and confectionary eyes" will lure Mr. Right (112). Peter presents himself as "ordinariness raised to perfection," like the male models of cigarette ads (61). (Significantly, these two mannequin-like characters are logically attracted to each other, and their pending marriage at the end of the novel adds to the anti-comedy nature of the novel.) Ainsley's act is that of the free-spirited psychology major doing her own market survey of available men to father her child. Targeting Len Shanks, Marian's friend from college, she learns that he is "a

seducer of young girls. . . anything over seventeen is too old" (33). Marian regards Ainsley's self-packaging as a sweet young thing with horror: "I studied her latest version of herself thinking that it was like one of the large plump dolls in the stores at Christmas-time" (68). Intimacy in this marketplace context is virtually impossible. Given the pervasive metaphor of economic exchange as the basis for relationships, one can only hope to get good value for one's emotional investment.

As sociologists Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen point out, "In a world of strangers, survival is to a large extent a matter of appearance and surface impressions . . . . . the constant mobility of an industrialized population places people in a context where they are judged, more and more, by their ability to 'display goods.' The atomized self becomes the vehicle for general conformity."[9] The atomized selves characterized in *The Edible Woman* are the places in which needs and desires flourish. Commodity fetishism, a logical result of commodity production, becomes the focus for satisfying those needs and desires. The characters package themselves, hoping they will be chosen and loved. Significantly, those characters who remain marginalized by the American disease of consumerism—Duncan in *The Edible Woman* and Joe in *Surfacing*—help guide the protagonists to new ways of perception.

Initially, Marian is also successful in presenting herself. Peter and her superiors at Seymour Surveys applaud her for her "sensible" behaviour. She is capable, reliable, almost always punctual; she meets acceptable social standards for a young female university graduate filling in time with her first job until marriage.

She totters along in the "high heels expected by the office" (12), a form of self-imposed foot-binding that connects her with the Cinderella story. Certainly, she suffers from a Cinderella complex, as evidenced by her willingness to let Peter take care of the "big decisions" after their engagement (90).

But against her better judgement and will, Marian's social self begins to unravel. Partly, Marian's smug superiority, her small, prim pride, can be seen in literary terms as the precursor of her psychic disintegration. Atwood's strong sociological and psychoanalytic impulses shape a reading of Marian's ensuing anorexia nervosa and confused paranoic behaviour in Laingian terms, as logical reactions against a crazy world. Marian's feet seem to be motivated by the "logic" she attributes to her subconscious. Musing over her actions in first fleeing from Peter and then accepting his proposal, she says, "I see that my actions were really more sensible that I thought at the time. It was my subconscious getting ahead of my conscious self, and the subconscious has its own logic" (101). The "agile feet" that turn on the cold water to deconstruct Peter's bathtub lovemaking tryst eventually propel Marian to run away from him in some finely crafted comedic anti-Gothic escape scenes.

Marian is fairly adept at managing impressions until she meets Duncan, an eccentric graduate student in English whom Marian attempts to survey for a beer questionnaire. From the beginning, Duncan is a paradox. He is associated with magic (he has changed the numbers on his apartment door), death (he is described as "cadaverously thin"), and youth (Marian initially asks to see his

father and wonders if he has lied about his age) (48-9). Duncan is the ultimate narcissist, who blatantly tells Marian, "You're just another substitute for the laundromat" (145). Just as he finds laundromats and ironing relaxing, so he uses Marian for diversion.

Even before meeting Duncan, however, Marian's fragile sense of self is beginning to unravel. It is maintained largely in relation to the inadequacies of others. She is cheerful *because* Ainsley has a hangover (11). She congratulates herself on her moral superiority and efficiency; her feelings are polarized by Ainsley's sloppiness and excessive behaviour. We begin to notice the fagility of Marian's precariously maintained selfhood when she says she is envious of Ainsley's job as a tester of defective electric toothbrushes. Even though Marian's job is better paying and more interesting, Ainsley has some future plans, and Marian does not (17). Marian's lack of goal orientation is underscored by her vision of a dystopian future when she is informed that she is required to join the company's pension plan. She sees herself as a spinster who is an object of contempt and ridicule: "Somewhere in front of me a self was waiting , pre-formed, a self who had worked . . . innumerable years for Seymour Surveys and was now receiving her reward. A pension. . . . I would talk to myself; children would throw snowballs at me" (21). Marian's "stolid" self is further diminished during the bar scene with Ainsley, Len, and Peter. Furious that Peter is depending on her as a "stage prop" for his image of the macho male hunter (71), she succumbs to her worst fear, the fear of making a scene, and flees from her companions.

Relieved at being retrieved by Peter (a "rescue" that has Gothic resonances), she continues to make a scene at Len's apartment by wedging herself under the bed. Identifying with the hunted rabbit of Peter and Len's boastful male-bonding discourse (in their graphic descriptions of the kill, they refer to the rabbit as "she" [69]), Marian "burrows" underground only to realize she has been "evading reality" (77). She identifies the motivation for her bizarre actions as rage (78), and deludedly sees her actions freeing her from Peter, whom she sees in an increasingly predatory light. Yet, inconsistently, Marian later accepts Peter's marriage proposal. In her distorted vision of the future, Peter will be her Playboy bachelor transformed into backyard barbeque prince who will take care of the rest of her life and wipe away her signature on the nemesis pension form, locked away in the "vaults of Seymour Surveys" (89).

Atwood's first two novels dramatize a mechanistic vision of contemporary life. The horror of the machine resides not necessarily in the machine itself but in the consciousness that operates it. Peter and Len (like the male characters in *Surfacing*) adopt the metaphor of the machine as a way of perceiving the world. Peter's close identification with his cameras and his car (they are extensions of his ego) predisposes his perceptions of nature and women as exploitable natural resources, his for the taking. Peter is a collector. He collects "costumes" ("suave winter costumes—dark suit, sombrely opulent tie . . . [and] jaunty . . . man-about-town suits" [146]). As well, he collects detective novels, men's magazines, guns and knives, and cameras.

The connection between the camera, the gun, and the phallus is unmistakable in both this novel and in *Surfacing*. In both novels, scenes of mock-rape with the camera as weapon illustrate how the predominantly male identification with machines shapes a mechanistic way of perceiving the world. At the party for the "soapmen and their wives" Peter exhorts Marian to look "natural" (232). Although Peter has verbalized his approval of Marian's sensible, practical nature, the first time he approves of her appearance is when she has allowed herself to be "etherized" like a "slab of flesh, an object" and submitted to elaborate grooming rituals in a beauty salon that could have been designed by the Marquis de Sade, described as it is through hospital-factory imagery (208-10). Transforming herself, at Peter's behest from "mousy" to "target" in her sequined red dress, she experiences a photographic rape:

> 'Now don't be modest,' he said. 'Could you just stand over there by the guns and lean back a little against the wall? He turned the desk-lamp around so that the light was on her face and held the small black light-meter out towards her. She backed against the wall.
> He raised the camera and squinted through the tiny glass window at the top, adjusting the lens, getting her in focus. 'Now,' he said. 'Could you stand a little less stiffly? Relax. And don't hunch your shoulders together like that, come on, stick out your chest, and don't look so worried darling, look natural, come on smile. . . .'
> Her body had frozen, gone rigid. She couldn't move, she couldn't even move the muscles on her face as she stood and stared into the round glass lens pointing towards her, she wanted to tell him not to touch the shutter-release but she couldn't move. (232)

The symbolic affinity that Marian feels for hunted animals echoes in this scene, as does Marian's perception of Peter as a Janus-like Gothic figure who alternately poses a threat to her psychic and physical safety and presents himself as a rescuer from her passivity. But what makes this photographic rape most threatening to Marian, is that she herself has begun to perceive the world in a fragmentary, metonymic way. Surveying herself in Peter's full-length mirror, she cannot "grasp the total effect" of her transformation as a sexual object. She can only see "various details, the things she wasn't used to—the fingernails, the heavy ear-rings, the hair, the various parts of her face that Ainsley had added or altered" (229). This metonymic view of the female body is not new to Marian's consciousness. She has, after all, been schooled by the discourse on femininity in her culture. Advertising images are full of close-ups of women's bodies as display props for goods. Even the Gothic sub-text which runs through the novel suggests the Gothic paradigm as one in which an innocent female protagonist reads the clues of her current mysterious predicament without ever piecing together the whole mystery from the sum of its parts.[10]

That Marian has begun to look at herself as Peter looks at her through his camera suggests her complicity in the process of victimization. She has allowed herself to be groomed as a sacrificial offering, not just to satisfy Peter's acquisitive collector's instincts, but as a symbolic sacrifice to the ideology of the consumer culture. Significantly, research on the self-perception of anorexics and obese people shows a similar fragmented perception of the body. Anorexics deny their emaciated mirror images and perceive

themselves as fat. Similarly, obese people often assume a metonymic perception of themselves, avoiding their whole mirror images and concentrating on isolated, more socially accepted body parts, such as their hands, feet, or faces.[11]

Inferentially, Peter's presentation of himself in everyday life comes from the discourse of men's magazines and detective novels. After his friend "Trigger" announces his intention to marry, Peter engineers a love-making tryst with Marian in the bathtub. Trying to locate the source for this fantasy, Marian think it has been fuelled by "one of the murder mysteries he read as what he called 'escape literature.'" She sees herself by extension as the illustration on the cover of a murder mystery:

> . . . a completely naked woman with a thin covering of water and maybe a bar of soap or a rubber duck or a blood stain to get her past the censors, floating with her hair spread out on the water, the cold purity of the bathtub surrounding her body, chaste as ice only because dead, her open eyes staring up into those of the reader. (60)

Carrying on Peter's fantasy, Marian's Gothic sensibilities imagine both of them falling asleep and drowning in the tub. Their towel-clad ghosts would, she fantasizes, haunt Peter's apartment building, and a mythology would be built up around their death: "'Suicide,' they'd all say. 'Died for Love'" (60-61).

This intersection of fantasies symbolizes the ways in which discourses of masculinity and femininity are polarized in the novel. Marian, schooled in feminine discourse, transforms what she interprets as an initially destructive urge in Peter into a bond that

takes them beyond death or marriage into a kind of romantic immortality. Marian realizes that Peter is using sex to mitigate his sense of loss over his friend's "death" to marriage, a loss he blames on the predatory nature of husband-hunting women in general. He turns to a genre of hard-boiled detective novels to fuel his sex fantasy, a genre that typically sees women as predatory betrayers who must be taught a lesson that usually ends in their death.[12]

If Marian is implicated by consumerist ideology, and surrounded by the glittering urban pastiche that forms the discourse field of the image world, then how does she get out? Atwood's spatial and mirror imagery in *The Edible Woman* points to a clue. Like *Surfacing*, the motifs of reflections, mirror images, eyes, and photographic images form a symbolic nexus in *The Edible Woman*. In both novels, Atwood deconstructs the "religion of glamour" that the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* has been schooled in most of her life[13]—a religion that finds its tracts in advertising images and popular fiction. Both protagonists are "taken out" of the entrapment of two-dimensional living, the reification of images, and into a mythic, archetypal realm that is closely connected with the natural world. What they bring back from these mythic journeys does not necessarily save them, but it does change them. The insights gained from these mythic journeys do not enable the protagonists to "find" their identities. They are able, however, to break a little freer from the tyranny of mirrors and the seductive, narcissistic images of selfhood they reflect to see some of the spiritual and ecological corruptions of the consumerist ideology.

Significantly, the journey that Duncan and Marian take through the city to the ravine takes them away from the glittering urban pastiche symbolized by Peter's apartment building into a border country between city and nature. (Duncan is associated with death and the underworld, an association that assumes mythic dimensions in the novel.) On the brink of winter and spring, the ravine is a collecting place for the city's detritus. It fills up with old drunks, old tires, and old tin cans. It is here that Marian discards the last of her adopted roles, that of Duncan's rescuer. Duncan warns her that he brings out the Florence Nightingale in women because "every woman loves an invalid." But he cautions her not to be seduced by this fantasy: ". . . hunger is more basic than love. Florence Nightingale was a cannibal you know" (100). In spite of his warning, Marian clings tenaciously to her fantasy of herself as rescuer and life-restorer. In the ravine, however, she sees "the starched nurse-like image of herself she had tried to preserve as a last resort crumple like wet newsprint" (264). But, after all the scraping off of the pastiche of her identity has occurred, Marian is still no closer to discovering an authentic sense of self. She realizes that even after discarding her acquired nurse-like persona, and after making it virtually impossible to be married to her "soapman" prince, "there was the possibility also that this revelation was just as fraudulent as so much else had been" (264).

Marian has performed and discarded most of the roles available to her: capable young university graduate, fiancée to a good "catch." She even takes the role of sexual object to its logical end. As a caricature of a sexually desirable female in her provocative red

dress and elaborate hairdo, she is treated as a prostitute by the desk clerk of the seedy hotel she goes to with Duncan: "The night clerk looked over at Marian with an undisguised though slightly jaded leer. She drooped her eyelids at him. After all, she thought grimly, if I'm dressed like one and acting like one, why on earth shouldn't he think I really am one?" (251). Future roles that are signposted for Marian—the vision of Clara as an earth mother leeched by her children, the vision of "a pre-formed self" as a dotty spinster, pensioned by Seymour Surveys (21), and the "thick sargasso sea of femininity" (167) that she experiences at the office Christmas party—appall her. She wants to avoid growing up, a regressive urge that is symbolized by her anorexia and her fear of pregnancy.

Alarmed by the dearth of choices, she turns to Duncan for help. But Duncan narcissistically warns that he will not recue her from her plight: "What do you expect me to do? he asked. You shouldn't expect me to do anything. I want to go back to my shell. I've had enough reality for now" (257). Refusing his role as underworld abductor, Duncan abandons Marian to her own resources. Looked at in the context of Atwood's preoccupation with the Persephone myth, we see Marian stranded without a redemptive male figure and also without a Demeter mother figure to bring her back to the world of the living. She must become her own mother, and give birth to her cake effigy, a parody that symbolizes Marian's recognition of the paradox of selfhood in consumerland.

Her journey to the ravine goes against the consumerist tide of "furred Saturday ladies trudging inexorably as icebreakers through

the slush, brows furrowed with purpose, eyes glinting, shopping bags hung at either side to give them ballast" (258). Warned by Duncan that her problems are "her own personal cul-de-sac" that she will have to invent her own way out of (264), she returns to consumerland and creates her cake effigy. Significantly, she chooses sponge over angelfood, and thus parodies her sponge-like absorption of the discourse on femininity. Her choice of expressive media also implicitly rejects the angel in the house legacy of Victorian ideology (267).

Peter refuses to eat the cake, calling into question the legitimacy of Marian's Gothic-inspired paranoia about his attempts to devour her. After Peter hastily leaves, Marian cannibalistically starts to eat her cake. As she does so, a "nostalgic" Gothic image of Peter forms in her mind: " She could see him . . . posed jauntily in in foreground of an elegant salon with chandeliers and draperies, impeccably dressed, a glass of scotch in one hand; his foot. . . on the head of a stuffed lion and . . . an eyepatch over one eye. Beneath one arm was a revolver" (272). She consigns this image to personal and cultural memory, like "a style that had gone out of fashion and was beginning to turn up on the sad Salvation Army clothes racks" (272). The attraction of the demon lover (a stock convention of mass-market Gothics), which has been a powerful seduction for Marian, has assumed a different, less compelling (but also less threatening) perspective.

What Atwood seems to be telling us in *The Edible Woman* is that there are all kinds of seductions and that the dialectic of desire and dissatisfaction inherent in consumerist ideology cannot be easily

evaded. Although the circular form of the novel encapsulates Marian, she is, after all, able to eat again, and she appears to have recovered some semblance of her "stolid" practical self. In addition, she has produced something creative, the cake effigy, her first creative act of the novel. There is a temptation to see rebirth and redemption in the ending, although Atwood sees it quite pessimistically.[14] Nevertheless, as Barbara Rigney points out, "she has at least graduated from her Alice phase, and she has learned a great deal about life and the processes of living, about being human."[15] Marian cannot fully free herself from the politics of consumption, but she does, at least, refuse to become Peter's trophy wife.

Notes

[1]Gloria Onley, "Power Politics in Bluebeard's Castle," p. 72.

[2]Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen quote from Raymond Williams' *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* in *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness*, p. 51.

[3]Susan Sontag explores the romantic mythology built up around tuberculosis in the nineteenth century in *Illness as Metaphor*.

[4]Graeme Gibson, "Margaret Atwood" in *Eleven Canadian Novelists*, pp. 20-1.

[5]Dorothy Smith, "Femininity as Discourse," pp. 39-40.

[6]John Lauber, "Alice in Consumer-Land: The Self Discovery of Marian McAlpin."

[7]See Kim Chernin's *The Obsession: The Tyranny of Slenderness*.

[8]Elspeth Cameron's article "Faminity, or the Parody of Autonomy: Anorexia Nervosa and *The Edible Woman*" provides an extensive analysis of Marian's anorexic behaviour.

[9]Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of the American Consciousness*. The Ewens refer to Thorstein Veblen's observation in 1899 summarized here, p. 265.

[10]See Joanna Russ's article "Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband," in which she presents an anatomy of the genre formula of modern Gothic novels. She says, "The Modern Gothic is episodic; the heroine does nothing except worry; any necessary detective work is done by others" (671).

[11]Hilde Bruch, *Eating Disorders*, pp. 87-92.

[12]See John Cawelti's analysis of detective novels in *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*, particularly Chapter 6 "The Hard-Boiled Detective Novel," pp.139-161.

[13]Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*, p. 42.

[14]Atwood says in interview with Linda Sandler:

> The tone of *The Edible Woman* is light-hearted, but in the end it's more pessimistic than *Surfacing*. The difference between them is that *The Edible Woman* is a circle and *Surfacing* is a spiral . . . . the heroine of *Surfacing* does not end where she began. (10)

[15]Barbara Rigney, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 37.

CHAPTER THREE

RANDOM SAMPLES AND POSSIBLE CLUES: SURFACING

Surfacing is a highly textured novel—textured in a symbolic sense, and also in the sense that it shows how individuals enter into discourse fields that are mediated by texts. As a complex metaphor for alienation and the complex equations of power and corruption, the "American disease" shapes a mode of perception that affects all the characters in the novel. "Random Samples" is a manifestation of the American disease in its predatory, mechanistic consumption of images. The film is also a symbolic reflection of the fragmentary, inauthentic pastiche that the narrator, in an attempt to repress the guilt she feels for her abortion, has constructed of her past.

Surfacing is both a psychological thriller and a detective novel. Readers soon detect the narrator's unreliability. We sense (from the trail of clues pointing to inconsistencies in the narrative) that some kind of blocking or evasion is going on. I will attempt to show how the symbols of "Random Samples," the "American disease," and formulae of detective fiction shape a reading of *Surfacing* within the larger theme of the politics of consumption.

Barbara Rigney, in her invaluable study *Margaret Atwood*, says: "Atwood's novels are never on one level; they are often . . . elaborate detective stories in which the reader must become the detective, and Atwood herself, as she indicates in *Murder in the Dark*, is the criminal: " . . . 'that's me in the dark. I have designs on

you. I'm plotting my sinister crime, my hands are reaching for your neck . . . Just remember this, when the scream at last has ended . . . by the rules of the game, I must always lie' [*Murder in the Dark*,30]" (18). Rigney points out that Atwood invites an almost collusive contract between writer and reader. By giving us unreliable narrators and leaving a trail of clues, Atwood challenges us to accept nothing at face value.

Margaret Atwood has called *Surfacing* a ghost story in the tradition of Henry James' "Turn of the Screw" in the sense that the ghosts the protagonist encounters are projections of her own personality.[1] Certainly there are ghosts in *Surfacing*: the ghost of the narrator's aborted fetus, the ghost of her putative husband, and the ghosts of her dead father and mother. But the most elusive and haunting ghost in the novel is the protagonist's own. This ghost is the unified self which she has lost or which remains uncreated, unborn. The narrator is both spiritually and emotionally dead at the beginning of the novel, and the metaphor of the journey charts, as Annis Pratt points out, a process of rebirth.[2]

The protagonist's mission to search for her father forces her to become a detective who must carefully read her environment for any possible clues that might lead her to discovering her father. Overtly, she is a detective searching for her father, but covertly she is a detective searching for a criminal—herself. Because she is avoiding dealing with the repressed, traumatic memory of her abortion, her journey urgently necessitates expiation for her "crime."

Because of the narrator's unreliability, the careful reader must also become a detective, sorting out fact and fabrication in the narrative. The reader's decoding process calls for a special kind of detective ability, one that resembles the psychoanalyst's. The inconsistencies in the narrative, the narrator's metafictional lurches, and the ways in which she focuses perception become a puzzle for the detective reader.

As Jerome Rosenberg points out, the present tense narrative intensifies the reader's work in distinguishing fact from fabrication.[3] We are not provided with a sense of distance from events (Wordsworth's powerful emotion recollected in tranquillity) that gives past-tense narratives a sense of reliability. Joe and David's pastiche film, "Random Samples," is much closer to the protagonist's process of discovery, a process that replicates the random nature of cognition. David's film is a pastiche just as he has become a pastiche. His personality is a random composite of jokes, cartoon character imitations, and inauthentic political and social affiliations. His character is just one example in the novel of how individuals are shaped by their interactions with social texts.

It is no coincidence that the reader of this novel is cast in the dual roles of detective and psychoanalyst. Both roles necessitate an ability to follow a trail of clues and an ability to use inductive reasoning to synthesize motive and causality. Both methods of discovery work backwards. The recursive process for both the detective and the psychoanalyst generally starts from some kind of trauma—disappearance, murder, or behaviour that is threatening to the individual or to others. Both the detective and the

psychoanalyst assert that what is pscyhologically hidden can be inferred from behavioural or forensic clues. In this sense, they are informed readers of both the objective world and the hidden world of human motive. They are code breakers. The detective's context is the crime, bringing the guilty to justice, and, in doing so, restoring social equilibrium. The psychoanalyst's focus is to examine aberrant, limiting behaviour that denies the subject full, self-actualized personhood.

Atwood's impulses are strongly psychoanalytic, as each of her first three novels demonstrates. Each of these first three protagonists—Marian, in The *Edible Woman*, the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing*, and Joan in *Lady Oracle*—experience psychic dislocation, and each tries to figure out why she is disturbed. But rather than focussing solely on individual experience in searching for answers, Atwood explores the individual as a microcosm of the larger culture. Atwood sees culture in the broadest sense, a scope that encompasses the artifacts of popular culture—photography, film, mass-produced fiction—as well as the "deeper" cultural heritage of myth. Margot Northey has called *Surfacing* a sociological Gothic in the sense that decoding one woman's experience will provide clues to the malaise of the larger culture.[4]

Atwood focuses her sociological criticism through her brilliantly poetic etiology of the "American disease." Her narrator seeks to break free from the psychological claustrophobia created by the polarities of patriarchal culture, polarities that are symptomatic of the American disease. Viewing the novel in this context urges us to read it as a psychological thriller. The protagonist's psychic process

of internalization, projection, and splitting are dramatized. We see how she has internalized real and imagined characteristics and activities of her environment, transforming them into inner regulatory characteristics. We see her internalizing aspects of the American disease, learning with her brother to collect and imprison living things, to vandalize a doll, to invent alibis. We see her go along with her lover's consumer attitude by agreeing to dispense with an inconvenient pregnancy. She complies with his materialist desire, but suffers the consequences of repressed guilt.

One of the most terrifying aspects of the American disease is its inexorable mechanization, symbolized by power lines, the power company, power boats, and cameras. The narrator's inability to feel, reflected by the flat detached tone of her narrative, makes her sound at times like a robot—an indication that she is infected with the mechanized American disease. Ironically, when Anna accuses her of being inhuman (154), she is quite accurate. The protagonist, having just seen the corpse of her dead father in the lake, has allowed the true memory of the abortion to surface in her consciousness, and is on her way to the terrifying descent into a non-human realm of existence. Her descent into the lake precipitates psychological surfacing and rebirth.

Reading the novel as a psychological thriller urges us to locate the protagonist's defensive psychic processes of externalization and internalization. We see the narrator's processes of denial and repression creating tension and inconsistencies in the narrative, forcing us to recursively examine clues. She tries to cover up the abortion by restructuring memory. Projection is a psychic process

in which a subject projects feelings about something or someone onto something or someone else. Incidents of psychic projection proliferate in the novel. The narrator sees amputation, loss, vacancy, disease, inauthenticity, and incongruity everywhere, especially during the "home ground, foreign territory" (11) journey into the border country between Quebec and Ontario.

In Chapter One, we are introduced to the narrator and her companions. She is driving with Joe, Anna, and David into the "border country" between Quebec and Ontario, en route to the island where her father has disappeared. We know she is tense about this journey; she keeps her hand on the car door "to brace myself and to get out quickly if I have to" (8). Her relationship with Joe is tense. Watching him, she thinks he looks like "the buffalo on the U.S. nickel, shaggy and blunt-snouted . . . and the defiant and insane look of a species once dominant, now threatend with extinction" (8). When Joe senses her scrutiny, he lets go of her hand and gives a clear non-verbal message: "That means I'm not supposed to observe him; I face front" (8). This exchange sets the mood for the narrator's scrutiny of her companions. She reads them as texts, trying to crack codes of behaviour that will yield some secret to understanding life.

The landscape of the journey into the island seems ominous. Images of death, disease, absence, incongruity, inauthenticity and impermanence abound. "Now we're on home ground, foreign territory" (11), thinks the narrator. The landscape the narrator describes is surreal, almost dream-like, and she is detached from it, watching from the car windows "as though it's a T.V. screen" (11).

The landscape is punctuated by "skeletons" of dead birch and elm trees, prey to the "disease . . . spreading up from the south" (7).

At first, the protagonist clings to her notion that somehow she is outside rampant consumerism. What she comes to realize, however, is that victimization is not the product of dominance compelling submission. More terrifying for the narrator, but also more ultimately life-affirming, is the knowledge that she is unconsciously complicitous in her victimization—not from choice, but from years of conditioning by a complex social, economic, and cultural system. The condemnation of Americans in this novel is not the simple, knee-jerk reaction voiced by David and parodied by Atwood: "Bloody fascist pig Yanks" (9). The metaphor represents the inherent complicity in all human beings. "The trouble some people have being German," realizes the narrator, "I have being human" (130). The narrator comes to terms with the realization that ". . . I had no idea what I would do with the power once I got it; if I'd turned out like the others with power I would have been evil" (37).

Just as David and Anna and the narrator's brother are prey to the disease, so even the narrator herself is seduced by it. Establishing herself as an Anglophone by her Parisian schoolgirl French in the village store, she is mocked and parodied by the locals. "I see I've made a mistake," she thinks. *I should have pretended to be an American"* (26) [emphasis mine].

Another sign of the American disease is the presumably abandoned underground bunker built by the American military. On the surface, it looks like an "innocent hill," but the "power lines" running into it are incongruous (9). What secret conspiracies could

be masked by the "innocent hill," wonders the narrator. Perhaps the generals and soldiers still live in there, invited in by "the city" because their copious drinking habits were good for business. Atwood's use of image and language in the bunker description, suggesting invasion, deception, exploitation, and complicity, is just one example of the poetic mastery of the novel. The novel itself reflects its setting. Like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, it is a kind of border country between novel and poetry. The exchange that occurs between the narrator and her companions in the bunker incident is the first metafictional lurch of the novel that alerts us to the narrator's unreliability: "That's where the rockets are," I say. *Were*. I don't correct it" (9).

The "tiny company town" with its "eighteenth century fountain . . . that looks like an imitation but . . . may be real" (12), turns up later in the narrator's fabricated memory of her wedding (88). The fiction of the wedding is maintained until after the narrator has allowed the truth of her abortion to surface. It is then she realizes that "[it] wasn't a wedding . . . the post office and lawn were in another part of the city . . . the fountain with the dolphins and cherub with half a face was from the company town, I'd put it in there so there would be something of mine" (144). Everything takes on the derivative and inauthentic nature of pastiche for the narrator until the guilt she feels about her abortion can be exorcized.

She is annoyed with Paul and his wife for looking like the "habitant" woodcarvings sold to tourists, but realizes that "it's the other way around, it's the carvings that look like them" (20). The

men in the local store have Elvis haircuts. The "regulation picture" in the bar is "an imitation of other places, more southern ones, which are themselves imitations, the original someone's distorted memory of a nineteenth century English gentleman's shooting lodge" (27). David slips into a "parody of himself," talking with the locals in a "yokel dialect" (28). David's self-parody, however, is closer to pastiche because of its lack of selfconsciousness. Even their guide to the island, Evans, is an American in wilderness costume, "checked shirt and peaked cap and a thick knitted jacket with an eagle on the back" (30). Evans processes tourists, who wear similar costumes: "businessmen in plaid shirts still creased from the cellophane packages" (17). Like the judgemental person who sees himself judged harshly by others, the protagonist's duplicity and inauthentic self are projected subconsciously onto her environment.

Projecting her innocence onto her parents is perhaps the most elaborate self-deception constructed by the protagonist. She feels she must protect them from the knowledge of her abortion, and so invents a fictional marriage. She conceals from them the fabrication of a baby left with her putative husband. What she comes to realize is that she was not protecting them by concealing the truth; she was trying to protect herself.

Splitting is another defensive psychic process that allows subjects to divide their ambivalent feelings about something or someone by creating two symbolic representations. For example, Freudian analysis of fairy tales examines good and bad mothers as two dimensions of one mother.[5] When Anna reads the protagonist's palm, she asks, "'Do you have a twin?'" (8). The

narrator's "twin" is alternately her aborted fetus and her brother. Her brother, like their father, is reasonable. He fishes "by technique," whereas the protagonist fishes "by prayer" (64). Unlike their father, however, the Surfacer's brother rejects his father's rationalist version of "the golden mean" (a life balanced by reason) to ally himself with the "Americans." "He was a realist, that protected him," thinks the protagonist (131).

What is revealed by their mother's "legacy" of the scrapbooks containing the narrator's and her brother's childhood drawings is the way these texts reflect childhood "conversations" with the ongoing discourses of masculinity and femininity in contemporary culture. The protagonist's scrapbooks are filled with cutouts of sometimes disembodied "ladies" from magazines and Disneyesque Easter bunnies and eggs. Her brother's scrapbooks are filled with images of war and destruction, "explosions in red and orange, soldiers dismembering the air, planes and tanks . . . little swastikas on the side" (90-91). As her pictures show her "religion of glamour" (42), so her brother's pictures show an idealization of mechanized, destructive power. The scrapbook legacies reflect the distinctions between "being" and "doing" inherent in gender roles.

"Seeing double" after her glimpse of her father's corpse in the lake, the protagonist thinks what she has seen is a image of her drowned brother. Discarding that version of her lake vision as fabrication, she thinks it is an image of her aborted fetus "in a bottle, curled up, staring out at me like a cat pickled" (143). This image is reminiscent of the creatures her brother trapped in bottles, creatures the protagonist tried to free (131). Earlier in the

narrative, the protagonist describes her "baby" as a "section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled" (48). The psychological process of splitting requires great psychic energy—an ability to keep symbols in separate psychic compartments. The protagonist's lake vision resonates with all the symbols of enclosure and confinement throughout the novel: Anna's "soul" captured in her gold compact, the images of conquest collected in "Random Samples," the confining boundaries of the fence and the house, and more abstractly, the confining gender roles imposed by patriarchal culture.

That the novel's imagery reflects the protagonist's state of mind soon becomes obvious. Her fiction that her lover has betrayed her into "dispensing" with an inconvenient pregnancy (inconvenient because he already has a wife and family) begins to deconstruct in light of a growing awareness of her own complicity in her "crime." Her lover has "used" her, but as an addict uses a drug, he had become "hooked . . . on unlimited supplies of nothing" (84). Like David and Anna, the narrator and her lover are hooked on each other, and act out a mutually destructive psychodrama. As psychological defence, the protagonist tries to evade the "ghost" of her lover as he intrudes on her memory. In the first of these "memorybank movies,"[6] the narrator thinks, "He puts his hand on mine, he tries that a lot but he's easy to get rid of, easier and easier. I don't have time for him, I switch problems" (24). We are not sure until after the guilt of the abortion is exorcized how much of these memories is fact, how much is fabrication.

The protagonist is wary and suspicious, and sees conspiracy everywhere. Ironically, she is fabricating a psychological conspiracy of deception, leaving a trail of clues alerting us to the inauthenticity, the pastiche, of her version of the past. The narrator's mental process, as demonstrated by her narrative, divorce her from her father's religion of reason and places her more closely with the postmodernist pastiche represented by Joe and David's film "Random Samples."[7] What the narrator attempts is a mental cover up, a pasting together of fact and fiction that will exonerate her. She projects her guilt onto her parents, assuming they have never forgiven her for "running off and leaving my husband and child" (29). But, as she has deconstructed David's personality as a fraud, so must her evasion and duplicity be exposed before she can become whole. As her constructions of "totalitarian innocence" (190) are stripped away, she learns how to see. Armed with the power of vision, she sees the pastiche that David, in the terminal stages of the American disease, has become:

> The power flowed into my eyes, I could see into him, he was an imposter, a pastiche, layers of political handbills, pages from magazines, *affiches*, verbs and nouns glued onto him and shredding away, the original surface littered with fragments and tatters. . . he didn't know what language to use, he'd forgotten his own, he had to copy. Second-hand American was spreading over him in patches . . . He was infested, garbled, and I couldn't help him: it would take such time to heal, unearth him, scrape him down to where he was true. (152)

The American disease is a complex symbol. Signs of the disease in the landscape and characters of the novel are not merely projections of the protagonist's disturbed psyche. Rather, the protagonist's perceptions are Laingian in the sense that her "crazy" perceptions are necessary to deconstruct a truly crazy world. To this point, I have focused my reading of *Surfacing* primarily as a psychological thriller, showing how the protagonist's psychic processes shape her vision of the debilitating effects of the American disease. I would now like to turn to an analysis of the genre of detective fiction as another "way in" to the novel.

For the purposes of this discussion, I will use John Cawelti's distinction between the model of the classical detective in *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (1976). Cawelti sees the classical detective exemplified by Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot, and the model of the "hard-boiled" detective exemplified by writers Hammett, Chandler, and Spillane (80). First, I will show how the narrator's father follows the model of the classical detective established by Poe, and how profoundly this approach to life has affected the protagonist. Next, I propose an exploration of the connections between the genre of the hard-boiled detective novel and *Surfacing*.

The forumlas of detective fiction can be seen as a kind of game for the writer, the detective protagonist, and the reader. The "rules" of the game are implicity understood by all participants, and, like other forms of diversion, the predictability of the fictional parameters heightens enjoyment. The classical detective's intellect aestheticizes crime and removes him from both the criminal and

the crime. His usually brilliant solution restores social order and reestablishes a sense of social equilibrium. The hard-boiled detective, on the other hand, is generally more implicated in the crime (often because of a romantic involvement with the criminal), and is a less intellectual, more cynical, game player.

Game imagery permeates *Surfacing*. The games played by the narrator and her brother school them both in gender politics, and the destructive games played by Anna and David keep them locked in psychological symbiosis. We know that Anna is somewhat "hooked" on detective novels and reads them voraciously. I see a strong connection between Anna's consumption of detective novels and the destructive games of sexual politics played out by David and Anna.

Cawelti establishes Poe as the father of the modern classical detective novel (101). Poe's mastery combined elements of the Gothic (the isolated, threatening setting, the emphasis on violence, terror and mystery) with detached rationality. Poe's model, which was adopted by Arthur Connan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and other famous mystery writers, serves to aestheticize crime by turning it into a game or a puzzle. Typically, emphasis in the classical detective novel is placed not on the crime but on the detective's process of solving the crime. Some of the Gothic elements typically survive in modern detective novels, particularly the sense of hidden guilt, but the significant differences between Gothic fantasies and classical detective stories lie in the ways in which social and psychological equilibrium is reaffirmed by the detective's solution of the crime. The classical detective, usually something of

an aristocratic eccentric, generally possesses extraordinary mental capabilities which are utilized to exorcise hidden guilt, rescue the world from chaos, and restore reason and order. In this way, evil is seen as an aberration and not endemic to the social order.

Atwood's characterization of the narrator's father embodies the classical detective model outlined by Cawelti. He is a man who "anticpated emergencies" (14). He is a man who "believed that with the proper books you could do everything yourself" (38)—as his library of technical books (*Edible Plants and Shoots, Tying the Dry Fly, Exploring Your Camera,* etc.) and detective novels ("recreational reading") affirms. He admired eighteenth century rationalists (Burns, Cowper, Johnson, and Goldsmith) because he believed that they "avoided the corruption of the Industrial Revolution and learned the secret of the golden mean, the balanced life" (38). As an "improviser on standard themes" (44), the narrator's botanist father removes his family to the Canadian wilderness and attempts to improvise his version of the golden mean by sheltering them from the city, the war, and the superstitions of religion. The narrator is not sure of his paid work, whether he works for the power company or the government (an association that calls into question the extent of her father's detachment), but his vocation is to live life rationally. Like other classical detectives, "isolation to him was desirable" (58). He sets himself apart from others: "He didn't dislike people, he merely found them irrational; animals, he said, were more consistent, their behaviour at least was predictable. To him that's what Hitler exemplified: not the triumph of evil but the failure of reason" (59). In his discussion of the paradigmatic

classical detective, Poe's C. August Dupin, Cawelti could well be describing the narrator's father: "[He] imposes the supreme clarity of his mind on the apparent chaos of the outer world . . . .'[He] is the supreme artistic ego: everything external to himself can be made to fit the theoretical, the ideal logic."[8]

The narrator is certainly her father's daughter. She is, in part, like a grown-up Nancy Drew who has internalized her father's voice of reason as her superego. Ostensibly, the narrator's search is for her father, who has disappeared in the Canadian wilderness. Motive is examined: has he gone mad? Is he lurking somewhere on the island, potentially threatening the narrator and her companions? Has he arranged his own disappearance? The narrator tries to work it out logically, following her father's rational approach to life. When she reaches the island, her father's voice of reason, his ghost, tells her very specifically what she should do. She should, she thinks, unearth the garbage to see how recent it is. She should be searching for clues. Her father, she knows, viewed reality in terms of causality—an "archaeological problem" (46). Someone, she thinks, could have picked him up and taken him to the village across the lake; he could have made a mistake and strayed from the trail, been lost in a blizzard, his logic failing in the face of entropy. No body has been discovered, and no motive or causality seems to make sense. Nevertheless, the fact that the narrator suspects her father of collusion in arranging his own disappearance gives us perhaps our first clue that she is projecting her own duplicity onto her father. We do not know at this point in the narrative that the narrator has had an abortion which she has blocked from her

consciousness. It is later, when the trail of clues she leaves us starts to become suspicious, that the reader's role as detective intensifies, and we must examine the trail again, taking nothing at face value and sorting through the inconsistencies.

When the narrator discovers her father's "unintelligible drawings" (60) of quasi-human, quasi-animal figures, she feels the *frisson* of Gothic terror similar to the feeling experienced by Gothic heroines as they confront The Terrible Secret.[9] Murder, suicide, or arranged disappearance have occurred to her as motives, but not insanity. Like Bluebeard's wife who opens the forbidden door and sees the corpses of her sisters, the narrator feels as if she has opened up "what I thought was an empty closet and found myself face to face with a thing that isn't supposed to be there, like a claw or a bone" (60). And if her father is insane and not dead, then "none of the rules would be the same." The "rules" are the mastery of the superego and ego over the id, a "game" that the narrator's tentative psychological survival depends on. It is a game, however, that leads to madness.

In a sense, however, discrediting reason is not a new game to the narrator. She experiences a certain satisfaction when her "husband" discredits her father's eighteenth-century rationalist heroes: "Burns was an alcoholic, Cowper a madman, Doctor Johnson a manic-depressive and Goldsmith a pauper. There was something wrong with Thompson also; 'escapist' was the term he used. After that I liked them better, they weren't paragons any more" (38). The insanity she attributes to her father turns out to be a projection of her own fragmented and beleaguered psyche, and her faulty

deductions are invalidated by her discovery of letters between her father and an anthropology professor. This correspondence proves her father's sanity. He had been collecting and recording aboriginal rock drawings. The narrator realizes: "This was the solution, the explanation: he never failed to explain" (103).

In the classical detective novel, crime is something that is removed from the detective. Crime is an aberration that, through the detective's superior powers of intellect, is eventually disposed of and solved. We come to realize in *Surfacing*, however, that however much the narrator adopts her father's rational approach to solving problems, she cannot remove herself from her own crime. Until she can face the guilt she has repressed about her abortion, she cannot be whole.

The hard-boiled detective genre explored by Cawelti seems part of the prevalent and debilitating disease of alienation, a disease that alienates men from women, and humans from nature. The hard-boiled tough-guy detective hero, typified by Hammett's Sam Spade, differs from the classical hero in his cynical belief that evil is endemic to society. Certainly, this belief is central to the theme of *Surfacing*. The protagonist comes to understand that there is no safety or glory in being a victim. She painfully realizes her complicity, a realization that denies her psychic safety or immunity from feeling. She realizes that we all have the potential for good and evil, as long as we are not too deeply infected with the American disease.

There are many manifestations of this theme, symbolized by the motif of war games in the novel. Anna's "theology," the detective

novels she consumes (170), manifests itself in her collusion in remaining trapped in a mutually destructive relationship with David. Just as there are "rules" or formulas in popular fiction, so Anna and David play their mind-games by rules. Despairing that David will "kill" her for forgetting her makeup, Anna tells the protagonist, "He's got this little set of rules. If I break one of them I get punished" (122). The pervasive misogyny of the hard-boiled detective genre is reflected in David's attitude to Anna.

One of the salient characteristics of the hard-boiled detective genre is an embodiment of evil in a "new," or emancipated woman. John Cawelti sees much of the focus of the atmospheric setting carried over into modern detective novels from the Gothic tradition. But just as settings in modern detective novels move away from the typical Gothic settings of isolated castle or monasteries to the modern city, so women in hard-boiled detective novels are transformed from victims into villains (156). Often the detective falls in love with a beautiful woman who turns out to be a murderer (146). Beautiful women often betray these tough-guy detectives, and, in retalitation, are often brutally murdered by the detective. As Cawelti points out, "Facing such a criminal, the detective's role changes from classical ratiocination to self-protection against the various threats, temptations, and betrayals posed by the criminal" (148). In the climax of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon,* Sam Spade reveals beautiful Brigid O'Shaughnessy as the killer. Not only is she guilty of murder, but she is trying to trade on the romance that has grown between them to save herself. "Tenderly" promising her she can come back to him

after twenty years in San Quentin, the parting scene between Sam and Bridget resonates with the tension of attraction and repulsion that readers of *Surfacing* have come to expect from David's ambivalence towards women: "He said tenderly: 'I hope to God they don't hang you, precious, by that sweet neck.' He slid his hands up to caress her throat. [10]

David's attitude towards Anna is similarly characterized by contempt, fear, and sexual attraction tinged with the threat of violence. He derides her for being "a pair of boobs" that manipulated him into marriage, thus denying him a career in the ministry. But he also fears that "she's trying to cut my balls off" (137-138). What the narrator realizes is that David and Anna have achieved "a balance almost like peace" in their mutual destructiveness (138). Like the perpetually balanced barometer couple she remembers from her childhood, David and Anna read each other's psychological weather, and respond in culturally programmed ways. The balance that David and Anna maintain parodies the balance of the "golden mean" idealized by the narrator's father. Their relationship is asymmetrical, however, because David holds the balance of power.

Anna and David's war games of sexual politics are paralleled by the narrator's brother's drawings of war games and his rigid "good and bad" classification of leeches—variations on a theme that foreshadows his alliance with powerful exploiters. This reflects the mythology of much popular fiction (westerns, murder mysteries, war novels, comic books) in which the good and bad sides are clearly delineated. Growing up to become a geologist for a big

multinational conglomerate in Australia (70) shows his acceptance of the dictum that "there were only two things you could be, a winner or a loser" (71). He chooses the side with the power. He, David, Joe, and the bogus Americans (who are really Canadians in disguise) typify the lust to consume and the exploitation and degradation of nature (and by extension, of women) [11] that are the viral triggers of the American disease. Unlike the intellectual puzzles of classical detective novels, however, the "war" games dramatized in *Surfacing* are deadly.

Cameras and photographic imagery form a nexus for perception in *Surfacing*. Both the protagonist's father and her male companions are photographers, but, whereas her father uses his camera as means to record reality in order to explain it, David and Joe use their camera to collect images in a predatory, lustful way. They "get" the ludicrous images of the dressed-up, folk-art moose in the same way that the "American" fishermen ask each other, "Gettin' any?" (121)—the question fraught with sexual innuendo. The camera represents a way of approaching the world that is highly symbolic. For David, the camera labels him as a tourist, someone who is passing through and immune from local problems, and it also labels him as a predatory materialist, thoroughly infected with the "American" lust for consumption and sensation. The equation between the camera, the phallus, and the gun is most clear in the mock rape that David perpetrates on Anna in the name of "art," or "Random Samples."

As Susan Sontag points out: "the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood."[12] If Sherlock Holmes had

used a camera, he would have used it very like the protagonist's father—to gain evidence to help solve puzzles. In David's hands, the camera becomes much more dangerous. Classical detectives spurn guns in favour of reason; modern hard-boiled detectives know that reason has its limitations and choose violence. The protagonist, by deconstructing both her father's religion of reason and the seduction of violence, is placed in a frightening psychological order country. Her need for psychic integration is intensified by the possibility that she may be carrying a child.

I have pointed out the connections between the narrator's cognitive process and the making of "Random Samples." Both are decontextualized, divorced from any understanding of or meaningful connection with the past. Both processes shun interpretation and thus remain superficial. Both attempt to appropriate experience: the narrator attempts to appropriate a version of normalcy through her fabricated marriage and child, and David seems to want a tourist's photographic record to authenticate his experience. That the narrator's process is defensive and David's process is ultimately aggressive is what finally separates them epistemologically and psychologically. Significantly, the narrator frees the captured images on David's film (as she has freed the creatures captured by her brother) just before her repressed guilt is freed from her subconscious during her lake vision.

Atwood's concern with popular culture, particularly the pastiche of mass culture and the genre of the detective novel, is evident in *Surfacing*. As she has said in interview with Linda Sandler:

> 'Popular' art is a collection of rigid patterns; 'sophisticated' art varies those patterns. But popular art is material for serious art in the way that dreams are. . . . You could say that popular art is the dream of society, it does not examine itself. Fairy tales do not examine themselves. They just *are*, they *exist*. They are stories that people want to hear. Some of them sell hope; others sell disaster, which seems to be equally appealing.16

The spiral form of *Surfacing*, as opposed to the circular form of *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* does offer hope. The commitment "to prefer life" and "above all, to refuse to be a victim" is what propels the protagonist to take her first tentative step out of rigid, game-like cultural patterns and into personhood.

Notes

[1]Graham Gibson, *Eleven Canadian Novelists*, p. 29.

[2]Annis Pratt, "Surfacing and the Rebirth Journey."

[3]Jerome Rosenberg, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 109.

[4]Margot Northey, "Sociological Gothic: *Wild Geese* and *Surfacing*," in *The Haunted Wilderness*, pp. 62-69.

[5]See the chapter "Transformations: The Fantasy of the Wicked Stepmother" in Bruno Bettleheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*, pp. 66-73.

[6]Margaret Laurence uses photography and film images as a metafictional construction in *The Diviners*. The term "memorybank movies" is from this novel

[7]John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, particularly the following chapters: "The Formula of the Classical Detective Story," "The Art of the Classical Detective Story," The Hard-Boiled Detective Story," and "Hammett, Chandler, and Spillane."

[8]Cawelti, p. 100-101. Cawelti is quoting Edward Davidson here.

[9]Joanna Russ, "Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband," p.669. Russ outlines the conventions of the modern Gothic novel.

[10]Cawelti, p. 165. Cawelti is quoting from Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*.

[11]Dorothy Dinnerstein in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (1976) sees a clear connection between the gender arrangements of patriarchy and the plunder of nature. "Mother-reared" men retain a sense of rage concerning infant separation from the all-powerful mother. The egocentric feeling that they should be able to take what they want and when is transferred to "Mother Nature." See particularly page 109.

[12]Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 4.

[13]Linda Sandler, "Interview with Margaret Atwood," p.10.

CHAPTER FOUR

HOOKED ON PLOTS: LADY ORACLE

> Moms, love and food are bonded firmly together. For when moms cook, they stir a heaping measure of love into every dish they make.
>
> *Canadian Living* magazine. May, 1989[1]

> Who knows what stories
> would ever satisfy her
> who know what savageries
> have been inflicted on her
> and others by herself and others
> in the name of freedom,
> in the name of paper
>
> "Gothic Letter on a Hot Night," Margaret Atwood[2]

Joan Delacourt Foster is, as the cover of the paperback copy of *Lady Oracle* says, "a most irresistable heroine."[3] The intimate first-person confessional tone of Joan's narrative engages our affections and empathy, while, at the same time, alerting us to Joan's unreliability and flamboyant compulsiveness. Joan's compulsive nature is complex. As a child and teenager, she eats obsessively to defy her mother. She is a compulsive liar—a predisposition which equips her to become a secretly successful writer of costume Gothic novels. Atwood focuses the theme of the politics of consumption in *Lady Oracle* on Joan's addictions to food and fiction.

Perhaps, as has been observed, there really are only two or three human stories, which go on endlessly repeating themselves. What I want to explore here is the inherent, if subconscious, complicity of these human patterns—patterns that keep people locked in self-limiting roles. The patterns run deep, emerging culturally in myth, story, and image. Although the patterns are self-limiting and ultimately culture-limiting, they are highly seductive. I propose using as my primary guides in this exploration Dorothy Dinnerstein's *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (1976), Tania Modleski's and Joanna Russ's serious studies of modern Gothic novels, and studies which analyze the causes and effects of compulsive eating.

Dinnerstein undertakes a fascinating, challenging exploration of the adage, "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world." The patriarchal system that gives women virtually exclusive power over nuturance of the young fosters the matriphobia, shared by both men and women, that keeps us locked in rigid and asymmetrical symbiosis and forms the basis of our collective alienation. Atwood shares Dinnerstein's psychoanalytic and sociological impulses to go back to the past to trace the route to "here"—and, in doing so, to find out what went wrong. This search is analogous to the detective's search. Both the detective and the psychoanalyst search for motive and take nothing at face value. Joan's digging for the truth, like Dinnerstein's, takes her inevitably back to Mother. The conflict between Joan and her mother centres around food and eating, and although this is not overtly Dinnerstein's concern, the insights of her

study combined with research into eating disorders can, I feel, be profitably applied to Atwood's work.

Modleski's study *(Loving With a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* [1982]) sees the female paranoia reflected in Gothic romances as a fictional mirror that reflects women's real fears and anxieties. Modleski shows how the seductive pull of Gothics offers women temporary psychological escape that is ultimately subverted by happy endings. Because the happy endings of Gothics "solve" the protagonist's problems through marriage, they do not provide scripts for authentic individual self-actualization. They do, however, reaffirm the social status quo.[4] Russ, in her article *"Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's my Husband: The Modern Gothic,"* corroborates Modleski's point of view:

> The apparent sado-masochism of the genre is partly an artifact of the narrative premise—that the Heroine must remain passive (or incompetent) in situations that call overwhelmingly for activity and decisions; therfore any connection the heroine has with the situation must be that of Victim . . . the Heroine's suffering is the principle action of the story **because it is the only action she can perform.** (Russ, 686)

What Atwood shares most profoundly with Dinnerstein, Modleski and Russ is, I believe, the sense that we are all *inside* ideology, just as we are all *inside* our culture. Comforting as it would be to believe that we are innocent victims of some manipulative machine controlled by "captains of consciousness,"[5] they seem to be suggesting that people are driven by some deeper inherited

motivation towards complicity in maintaining addictive, self-destructive patterns.

The metaphor of dance is a particularly helpful one in understanding these complicitous relationships.[6] Dancing girls abound in Atwood's fiction and poetry, and they are almost always in some kind of trouble. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan idolizes ballerinas, but is betrayed by Miss Phlegg and her mother and forced to dance as a giant mothball. Marginalized by her fat, Joan invents a Fat Lady persona, who dances a death-defying high-wire act. (Joan knows this is a fantasy. When the crowd's roar has died down, she knows the Fat Lady returns to the freak show.) Joan's matinee idol, Moira Shearer in *The Red Shoes*, is forced to abandon her dancing career for the love of her man. Like the Little Mermaid, Shearer sacrifices her voice (her art), but "neither of them had been able to please the handsome prince; both of them had died" (218). The Royal Porcupine temporarily fulfils some of Joan's dancing fantasies, but ultimately renounces his demon-lover dancer's cape and goes straight. Joan suffers from the delusion that because she does her dancing "behind closed doors" she will escape Shearer's (and the Little Mermaid's) fate. Dancing, like some kinds of fiction, follows certain formulas and patterns that seem glamorous and easy but extract heavy prices. In *Lady Oracle*, both dancing and fiction carry a very large warning: *Caveat Emptor*—Let the Buyer Beware.

Joan's mother wants Joan to be a dancing girl and enrols her in Miss Phlegg's dancing class. Even the name she gives Joan (after Joan Crawford) suggests an implicit desire to point the way out of female patterns of powerlessness. But Joan is never sure of the

symbolism of her mother's act of naming. "Did she name me after Joan Crawford because she wanted me to be like the screen characters she played—beautiful, ambitious, ruthless, destructive to men—or because she wanted me to be successful?" (38). Perhaps, Joan muses, the impulse to name her after this particular screen heroine was primarily motivated by the fact that "Joan Crawford was thin" (39). Significantly, Crawford's name is a fiction; her real name is Lucille LaSuer. Joan's name is similarly never fully her own, but her mother's symbolic property. What is also significant is that Joan's mother, like the narrator of *Surfacing*, is never named. Who is this powerful Mother, and why is she such a threat to Joan? Is she the three-headed monster that Joan feels is pursuing her from beyond the grave? Is she a woman caught up in the particular historical circumstance of *The Feminine Mystique* that Betty Friedan named in 1963? Joan's mother's namelessness reflects multiple readings of her character.

A "way in" to understanding Joan's paranoia about her mother centres around food and eating. "My mother had always cooked, I had eaten, those were our roles," says Joan (210). And within those production-consumption roles, the war between Joan and her mother begins to escalate. As a child and a teenager, Joan develops an obsession with food and becomes a compulsive eater in order to thwart her mother's attempts to make Joan "over in her image, thin and beautiful" (86). What she wants from Joan is never entirely clear, and neither is it ever entirely enough. Like her home decorating projects, she "didn't want her living rooms [or her daughter] to be different from everyone else's, or even very much

better. She wanted them to be acceptable, the same as everyone else's, although her idea of everybody else changed as my father's salary increased" (68). The "professionalized" relationship between Joan as the "product" and her mother as "the manager, the creator, the agent" (64), has built into it a tragic flaw, a kind of planned obsolescence that inevitably breeds mutual dissatisfaction. In this respect, the commodity consumption that drives capitalism becomes a metaphor for how people treat each other. The system is kept going by a dialectic of desire and dissatisfaction—a profoundly disturbing metaphor for relationships.

Joan's mother's problem seems to be the "problem with no name" that Betty Friedan called *"The Feminine Mystique"*. Historically, the problem intensified as North American men and women, reeling from World War II, attempted to recreate a suburban version of Eden. The movement was fuelled by utopian yearning, but the vision soon soured, as women found no outlet for what Dinnerstein calls:

> the particular human pleasure...of enterprise, of mastery—through which (as Freud points out) each member of our species tries, while at the same time harboring deep misgivings about the value of the effort, to console itself for a peculiarly human loss—the loss of infant oneness with the world—to assert itself against a peculiarly human discovery—that the important features of human existence elude control. (8)

But even as Joan comes to a tentative understanding of her mother's sociological and historical fate, she nurtures the feeling that her mother betrayed her, and denies her mother forgiveness. Case studies of women in therapy tend to show that mothers tend

to identify more strongly with their daughters than with their sons.[7] Nancy Chodorow, in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, (1978) concludes that:

> The mother does not recognize or denies the existence of the daughter as a separate person, and the daughter then comes not to recognize, or to have difficulty recognizing herself as a separate person. She experiences herself, rather, as a continuation or extension of. . . her mother. (103)

Rationally, Joan seems to understand her mother's historical circumstance, but, as Dinnerstein eloquently points out, we do not organize our lives rationally. Retracing her life in Terremoto, Joan comes to this realization about her mother:

> It wasn't that she was aggressive and ambitious, although she was both those things. Perhaps she wasn't agressive or ambitious enough. If she'd ever decided what she really wanted to do and had gone out and done it, she wouldn't have seen me as a reproach to her, the embodiment of her own failure and depression, a huge edgeless cloud of inchoate matter which refused to be shaped into anything for which she could get a prize. (64-65)

Joan's mother's tragic awareness that "the important features of existence elude control," (*MM*,8) as Dinnerstein points out, precipitates her death. Ironically, as Joan begins to control her eating and her weight to fulfil Aunt Lou's bargain that she lose one hundred pounds to claim her inheritance, her mother becomes more deranged. She bakes high-calorie pies and cookies and leaves them around to tempt Joan into breaking her diet (122). Joan's attempt to eat to defy her mother, which she describes as a "war" in which "the disputed territory was [Joan's] body" (67), turns out to be a

prelude to the war that escalates after Joan begins to lose weight. Joan's mother begins to drink heavily, to lose her rigidly maintained veneer of make-up and cynicism, and to dissolve in "spasms of rage, a dishevelled piecemeal rage unlike her former purposeful fury" (123). When Joan lets slip her plans to use Aunt Lou's money to leave home, Joan's mother's rage turns to fear, and she abortively attacks Joan with a paring knife, hysterically threatening "God will never forgive you!" (123).

Hilde Bruch, a leading researcher in the field of eating disorders, identifies two salient traits in the development of severe eating disturbances: the inability to recognize hunger and other bodily sensations, and the delusion of not living one's own life, of not having a recognizable identity.[8] Eating disturbances appear to be inevitably traced back to family dysfunction. Lawrence Hatterer, a psychiatrist who maintains an extensive practice dealing with addicts of all kinds, finds a common theme in the family backgrounds of all addicts: "Every addictive adult I have treated has told either of excesses of inconsistencies or of deprivation or overindulgence in early life."[9] Hatterer's findings in *The Pleasure Addicts* (1980) corroborate both Bruch's and the work of British feminist social critic, Susie Orbach. Orbach and Bruch, however, locate family dysfunction more specifically than Hatterer in the mother-daughter relationship. According to Orbach in *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978), "The feminist perspective reveals that compulsive eating is, in fact, an expression of the complex relationships between mothers and daughters," (Orbach, 14).

Orbach explores the great ambivalence women feel towards feeding their daughters:

> A mother must make sure her daughter is not overfed in case she becomes greedy and overweight—a terrible fate for a girl. She must make sure the child looks healthy—this is normally associated with a certain roundness—and she needs the child to depend on her; for who else is she, if she is not seen as a mother? Yet she may also dislike this dependency, which ties her down, drains her and prevents her from directing her energies elsewhere. Finally she must prepare her daughter to become the future nurturer of someone else—her daughter's future child, lover, husband or parents. She must teach her child to be concerned with feeding and nourishing others at the cost of not fully developing herself. (19)

As long as women rock the cradle—that is, as long as women have primary responsibility for nurturing (and feeding, in the widest possible sense) the young—and as long as men rule the world, says Dinnerstein, the cultural pathology created by this asymmetry will continue to manifest itself. It seems that all paths lead to Mother. Father is also implicated, but, because his world-making enterprise removes him from providing care to the young, he is implicated by default. According to Hatterer, ". . . especially in the family of a weak, nondisciplinary, passive, or absent father and a detached, unnurturing mother, the potential for addiction can reach malignant proportions" (*PA*,19). Joan's life dramatizes this clinical observation.

Obviously, Joan does not eat because she is motivated by hunger—the biological need to sustain her physical equilibrium. She

eats to punish her mother and to attempt to establish boundaries between herself and her mother.[10] Joan's physical bulk gives her a certain power over her mother: "I swelled visibly, relentlessly, before her very eyes, I rose like dough, my body advanced inch by inch towards her across the dining-room table, in this at least I was undefeated. I was five feet four and still growing, and I weighed a hundred and eighty-two pounds" (67). But Joan eats also from panic. She has picked up from overheard conversations between her father and mother that she was a "mistake," that if not for the accident of her birth, her mother would not be trapped in an unsatisfying marriage: "Did I want to become solid, solid as a stone so she wouldn't be able to get rid of me? What had I done? Had I trapped my father, if he really was my father, had I ruined my mother's life? I didn't dare to ask" (76). But when the psychiatrist to whom Joan's mother has sent her suggests joint counselling for a "family problem that couldn't be solved by treating [Joan] alone," Joan's mother indignantly dismisses any hint that she might be complicitous in Joan's compulsive eating.

Joan has a vested interest in being fat; she has something positive to gain from it. Like anorexia, obesity as an attempt to deal with problems of sexual identity. Joan's compulsive eating is primarily motivated by her rage against her mother. However, her fat also desexualizes her in any conventional sense. Joan has few sexual experiences. Her first is with the "daffodil man" who offers, like the quintessential Gothic model, the promise of violation and rescue. The second sexual experience is with a high-school boy Joan's own age who inexplicably kneels and buries his face in Joan's

"enormous stomach," while he has an orgasm (96-97). This seems to suggest some kind of mother or goddess worship or breast repatriation, with the boy idealizing some steatopygous idol, a projection that goes far beyond Joan as an individual. Joan's next sexual encounter is a marriage proposal from the Mediterranean cook at the Bite-a-Bit restaurant where Joan is working as a cashier. It is easy to see why Joan does not see this as a sexual experience—the man has (she realizes later when she sees stocky Italian wives) recognized that Joan had "the shape of a wife already, I was the shape it took most women several years to become" (99).

Even after Joan becomes thin, her obsession with food and eating remains with her and becomes reactivated in times of crisis. Hilde Bruch, in *Eating Disorders* (1973), calls this kind of response to high stress situations "reactive obesity." Bruch sees a kind of logic in compulsive eating as a response to deeper psychological problems. She points out that however self-destructive compulsive eating may become, it is still less destructive than deep depression or suicide. Seen in this way, compulsive eating has a self-supporting function. Given this background, Joan's "case study" supports Bruch's analysis. Seized by an attack of bridal nerves before her wedding to Arthur, Joan stuffs herself and gains thirteen pounds. Home in Braeside after her mother's death, Joan binges, all the time expecting her mother "to materialize in the doorway with that disgusted, secretly pleased look I remembered so well—she liked to catch me in the act" (178).

Joan and her mother, in their symbiosis, have become what psychiatrist Lawrence Hatterer in *The Pleasure Addicts* calls

"addictive complements"—a term he coined to describe any person, group, or environment that fosters the addictive process (*PA*, 19). In a broad sense, the consumer culture is an addictive matrix. As Hatterer points out, "ours is a society of polarized excesses that is the essence of addictive life" (*PA*, 15). We value will-power and self-control, yet we are bombarded daily by images that urge us towards pleasurable consumption—"Let yourself go!"

Being fat forces Joan into being a sideline spectator of her culture, in spite of her childhood longing to be on stage—admired and loved. In the Mothball debacle, Joan goes through a process of idealism, disillusion, and, finally, rage and helplessness at her betrayal by Miss Phlegg and her mother. Children do not forgive easily. The Mothball incident is a consciousness-raising turning point for Joan. As an adult, Joan buries her rage, rationalizing that the image of "an overweight seven-year-old stuffed into a mothball suit and forced to dance" (48) is ludicrous. "If Desdemona was fat [muses Joan] who would care whether or not Othello strangled her? Why is it that the girls Nazis torture on the covers of the sleazier men's magazines are always good looking? The effect would be quite different if they were overweight" (48). Joan realizes, however, that fat women are just as oppressed as thin women by the ideals of female beauty, perhaps even more so, because they are marginalized.

As a child she is an obvious target for the malevolence of other, more "normal," girls, who demonically delight in their ability to reduce Joan to a blubbering victim. As a teenager, however, Joan's obesity poses no threat to other girls, and she plays the "kindly

aunt and wisewoman to a number of the pancake-madeup, cashmere-sweatered, pointy-breasted girls in the class" (91). Aunt Lou's legacy is more than the money she leaves Joan; it is Aunt Lou who has provided the script for the kindly aunt role. What this allows Joan to do is to get inside the other girls' lives, to know their secrets. "Everyone trusted me, no one was afraid of me, though they should have been. I knew everything about my friends . . . I was a sponge" (93). Later, as successful costume Gothic author Louisa K. Delacourt, Joan exploits in fiction much of what she has absorbed from this unhappy time. The stock modern Gothic convention of the trusted duenna, a role Joan knows well, turns up as Mrs. Ryerson, the "plump, friendly housekeeper" of Joan's Gothic novel *Stalked by Love*. Joan's teenage "friends" are conscripted for exotically costumed central roles and "guest appearances" in her novels.

Most importantly, Joan gains a "thorough knowledge" of her readers: "those who got married too young, who had babies too early, who wanted princes and castles and ended up with cramped apartments and grudging husbands" (93). Joan senses that posing as a well-meaning friend to the other girls is perverse, but her well-honed impulse of duplicity keeps her from revealing herself: "I drank it all in but gave nothing out, despite the temptation to tell everything, all my hatred and jealousy, to reveal myself as the duplicitous monster I knew myself to be" (93).

Joan, like Marian and the Surfacer, has no real female friends. In Atwood's first three novels, girls and women mistrust and fear each other. Perhaps the pervasive theme of hostility among women in

Atwood's novels (Atwood returns to this theme in *Cat's Eye*) is one reason that the Gothic model permeates so much of Atwood's writing. It is a model that shows the female protagonist isolated and paranoid, with no friends among her peers. (Younger girls or older female servants are sometimes permitted as confidantes or companions within the conventions of the Gothic novel.) The only hope of redemption from this alienation state is through marriage. Joan's marriage to Arthur, instead of redeeming her, duplicates the symbiotic patterns of Joan and her mother.

Art mirrors life, and the Gothic paradigm, Atwood appears to be telling us, is not a distortion of women's lives, but a mirror which reflects reality. And as the extensive mirror imagery of the novel crescendos, we realize that mirrors do not offer escape. The fictional escapes that Joan thinks she is offering her readers and herself are, in fact, traps that keep them "hooked on plots"—hungry for more.

Much has been written about the Female Gothic—defined broadly as Gothic novels written by women primarily for women—in both its serious forms (Flannery O'Connor, Sylvia Plath, Doris Lessing, et al), and its modern popular forms (Daphne DuMaurier, Victoria Holt, Phyllis Witney, et al). As well, there have been recent valuable feminist revisionist readings of older Gothic texts such as *Jane Eyre*, *Northanger Abbey* (like *Lady Oracle*, a Gothic parody), and *Frankenstein*.[11] I do not want to digress here by dwelling on what makes or does not make a Gothic; nor do I wish to attempt a definitive classification of where I think *Lady Oracle* fits into the various recent classification systems for Gothics.[12] It is quite clear,

however, that *Lady Oracle* is a comic parody of the Gothic form. Through humour, and through the story-within-a-story form, Atwood deconstructs the conventions of the Gothic model. In doing so, Atwood also deconstructs her female readers' readings of Gothic conventions, leaving them and us without the resolution of a happy ending. As Modleski points out in *Loving with a Vengeance*, women turn to Gothics and other popular fiction for symbolic satisfactions for deeper fears and anxieties. Harlequin romances deal with the anxieties of finding a husband; Gothics deal with women's anxieties about living with men.[13] As in real life, the men in Gothics who are often perceived as lunatics and murderers do give women reason to fear them.[14]

Joan's early life prepares her well to be a writer of modern Gothic novels. She is the target of the vicious schemes of other females, a standard feature of modern Gothics.[15] Isolated, marginalized, and desexualized by her fat, Joan shares the sexual inexperience of her Gothic heroines, if not their conventional, obligatory slimness. Her kindly aunt role reflects one of the only permissible friendships in modern Gothics, the friendship of the heroine with an older woman, usually a servant. Ironically, Joan's duplicity connects her more closely with the ominous Other Woman than with the rather simple-minded protagonist who suffers from a kind of "totalitarian innocence."[16] In addition to these features of modern Gothics, Joanna Russ lists two more common features of the genre. Mothers are either good but dead or alive and malicious, and fathers are usually "ineffectual, absent, or . . . long-dead" (667-668).

The imagery Atwood connects with Joan's mother dramatizes her monstrous nature in Joan's mind. Sitting at her three-way mirror, she suggests the image of the wicked queen in Snow White, a mother who also betrayed her daughter. She is a three-headed gorgon who invites Joan to "watch Mother put on her face" in her three-way mirror. What Joan does come to understand in Terremoto is that she cannot merge with her mother, even though the pull to do so is very seductive.

Joan sees a dream vision of her mother outside her window.[17] Her mother is crying and beckoning Joan to follow her into death: "I loved her but the glass was between us, I would have to go through it. I longed to console her. Together we would go down the corridor into the darkness. I would do what she wanted" (330). But when she abruptly comes out of her trance, Joan realizes that she has to relinquish this dream of merging with her mother because of its seductive death-wish nature. Remembering her automatic writing experiments with the three-way mirror from which her *Lady Oracle* poems emerged, Joan realizes:

> It had been she standing behind me in the mirror, she was the one who was waiting around each turn, her voice whispered the words. She had been the lady in the boat, the death barge, the tragic lady with flowing hair and stricken eyes, the lady in the tower. She couldn't stand the view from her window, life was her curse. How could I renounce her? She needed her freedom also; she had been my reflection too long. What was the charm, what would set her free? (331)

Joan understands that daughters never really escape from the influence of their mothers as long as they stay imprisoned inside

cultural mythology. Joan realizes that her mother is both muse and nemesis. She is the muse who inspires the "automatic" connection between the tragic lady in the death boat (in the *Lady Oracle* poems) and the Lady of Shalott, a symbol of the imprisoning effects of the romantic ideal. Joan's mother is also "she who must be obeyed," a queenly, judgemental figure, but, ultimately, a tragic figure. Like her heroine Joan Crawford, Joan's mother "worked hard, she built herself up from nothing" (38), but both are fated for tragedy by something larger than individual destiny.[18] After her mother's death (in which her father, in Joan's mind, is implicated), Joan realizes her mother was justifiably paranoid and not deluded when she complained about not being appreciated. She had "done the right thing, she had devoted her life to us, she had made her family her career as she had been told to do" (179), but her anger at this entrapment had killed her spirit, even if she had not taken her own life. The fact that Joan suspects her father of pushing her mother down the basement stairs to her death reinforces Joan's insight into her mother's "real" paranoia.

Joan's father is largely absent. As a war hero and doctor, ambiguous and almost unreadable, he becomes the Gothic male model—the Janus figure who rescues often unwilling people from death by suicide. Yet, in his intelligence job during the war, he killed people "in cold blood," as Joan's mother informs her shocked dinner party guests (73). While Joan's father is involved in the "world making" enterprise that Dinnerstein talks of, Joan's mother is the undisputed ruler of the domestic sphere. Ironically, much of the world-making enterprise involves destruction, or the potential

for destruction, and Joan longs for her father to tell her "the truth about life . . . which he must have known something about, as he was a doctor and had been in the war, he'd killed people and raised the dead" (74). What she gets instead is an enigmatic man who raises house plants, listens to opera, and complies with the rigid tidiness that Joan's mother imposes on the house. He politely wears his slippers, and does his best not to disturb the plastic covers on the furniture.

He keeps Joan at a distance, and treats her "more like a colleague than like a daughter, more like an accomplice," (75) But although Joan recognizes their complicity, she wonders: "But what was our conspiracy? Why hadn't he come back on leave [from the war] during those five years? A question my mother asked also. Why did they both act as though he owed my mother something?" (75) What he "owes" Joan's mother is the accident of Joan's birth. As a doctor, he could have "done something" to get rid of Joan. This is the terrible secret that fuels Joan's need to make herself solid, to flesh herself out. The Terrible Secret, another stock convention of popular Gothics, is something Joan has intimate experience with.[19] And so, while Joan's father enigmatically goes about his work, Joan's mother feels trapped: isolated in various upwardly mobile houses, friendless, with no outlet for her energy other than the "projects" of Joan-making and home decorating.

While Joan's parents continue their macabre psycho-dance, Joan is busy escaping, she thinks, to forge new patterns of her own. What she ends up with in her marriage to Arthur, however, is very much like Joan's relationship with her mother. As a wife, Joan takes

on her mother's role of food provider, and finds that cooking is not as simple as it seems. Her fondue turns to "lymph and balls of chewing gum," her chicken bleeds when cut, and her pie crust is rubbery. Joan is not dismayed by her kitchen failures: to her they are successes, triumphs over the "notion of food itself. [She] wanted to prove that [she] didn't care about it" (211). What amazes Joan, however, is Arthur's reaction to all of this. Although he criticizes her cooking, Arthur enjoys Joan's defeats. Joan's "failure was the performance and Arthur was the audience" (211). This evokes the complicitous symbiosis of Joan and her mother. Although not a great drinker himself, Arthur takes to leaving liquor around for Joan to consume, reminiscent of Joan's mother leaving cakes out to tempt Joan. He does not approve of Joan's extravagant nostalgia clothes and chastises her for "playing into the hands of the exploiters" by wearing them, yet Joan suspects he is secretly aroused by them (18).

Complicitous relationships thrive on secrets, and secrets, like Gothic sub-plots, abound in this novel. The connection between Arthur and Joan's mother is furthur heightened by their similar manic-depressive cycles. Arthur launches into his political projects with the same dedication with which Joan's mother undertakes her home-decorating projects. When her ultimate "project"—Joan—leaves, Joan's mother slides into a profound depression. Similarly, Arthur takes on banning the bomb and Canadian Nationalism during his manic phases and sinks into passive and sullen television watching in his depressive phases. Unconsciously, Joan has

duplicated her relationship with her mother in her relationship with Arthur.[20]

Ostensibly, the audience for Joan's confessional narrative is the reporter who will presumably tell the world the true story of her untidy life. Joan's narrative is a flamboyant performance, and, as the reader soon discovers, she is a compulsive liar. Nevertheless, perhaps Joan's "real" fiction (as opposed to her "unreal" fiction, the "bodice ripper" Gothics she writes for a living), for all its limitations, does achieve a breakthrough in intimacy that is potentially completed by the reader. Joan tells us "she wished to be believed" (148) in spite of her compulsive lying. In a way, by telling her story, Joan is fulfilling the rather drunken advice given her by Eunice P. Revele (also known as Leda Sprott) during Arthur and Joan's weird wedding ceremony: "Avoid deception and falsehood; treat your lives as a diary you are writing and that you know your loved one will someday read" (205).

For a woman whose engrained habits are duplicity, evasion, and escape, the act of telling this version of the truth is radical. As a satirist, however, Atwood does not allow us to feel too sentimental or comfortable about the intimacy and empathy we feel for Joan. Joan remains unreliable and alienated, in spite of our wanting to read redemption (however implied or tentative) into the ending.

We want endings to provide a hint of utopian promise. But the ending of *Lady Oracle* satirically underscores Joan's earlier observation that "knowledge isn't necessarily power" (38). Our need for some echo or hint of utopian promise is strong: we crave the satisfying, noble, major-chord ending. We want an ending that,

even though it takes heroines to the altar or to the grave[4], signals a resonant sense of resolution. Atwood, in *Lady Oracle* as in her other novels, consistently denies us that complacency.

Joan is convinced at the end of the novel that she will not write any more Costume Gothics—they were, she feels, too "bad" for her. She thinks maybe she should try some science fiction; even though the future is less appealing to her than the past, she is sure "it's better for you" (345). This sounds like someone contemplating a diet after a bout of prolonged food extravagance. Science fiction, like oat bran, has a kind of spartan, healthy appeal that the high-calorie dessert Costume Gothics lack. Indeed, food imagery and an obsession with eating are central to this book, and, as I have outlined, closely connected to female identity. As Susan Rowoski points out, Joan, at the end of this narrative, is beginning to cast herself in yet another story.[21] Joan's new story does not have the formula-breaking potential of science fiction; it is, in fact, a reworking of a mass-market nurse novel. Joan has always felt drawn to "a man in a bandage" (345). She has the formula-nurse-novel script provided by Paul's Mavis Quilp novels embedded in her subconscious, and the journalist whom she has banged over the head with a Cinzano bottle is "nice," even if "he doesn't have a very interesting nose" (read *unGothic* proboscis) (345).

Lady Oracle is a complex novel about symbiosis between men and women, between women and other women, and between mothers and daughters. Patriarchy and the consumer culture provide a rich breeding ground for the kinds of cultural pathology that Atwood hilariously deconstructs in *Lady Oracle*. We are all, in

some ways, hooked on the "plots" of our culture. Atwood has named the essential structure of *The Edible Woman* as a circle, and the form of *Surfacing* as a spiral.[22] Whereas the circle is a closed form, which returns the end to the beginning, the spiral suggests at least the potential of some forward movement for both the protagonist of *Surfacing* and the larger culture. Rather than pursuing the implicit optimism of the spiral form, however, Atwood has returned to the circle form in her third novel. Joan is really no further ahead in understanding herself at the novel's end, although she has, it could be argued, made some reconciliation with the spectre of her mother. That Joan is more than the aggressively marketed author of her book of pop-occult poems, more than a product or a series of role labels, causes us to hope for her: she survives. Even though she does not give us an oracular vision or a prescription for the future, she does make us laugh. And laughing reassures us that, in spite of it all, we are still here.[23]

Notes

[1]Baird, Elizabeth, "From Mom with Love.: *Canadian Living* . May 1989, p. 79.

[2]Margaret Atwood, "Gothic Letter on a Hot Night," from *You Are Happy*, p. 15.

[3]_____. *Lady Oracle*. Toronto: Seal Books and McLelland and Stewart, 1977. All subsequent citations in the text refer to this edition.

[4]See also Susan Rosowski, "Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*." Rosowski's article helps clarify the Gothic elements that exist within social mythology.

[5]This phrase was coined by Stuart Ewan in his book *Captains of Consciousnes: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*.

[6]In *A Dance of Anger: A Woman's Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships*, Harriet Lerner uses the metaphor of a dance to symbolize destructive, self-limiting relationships. This resonated for me with the dancing girl imagery throughout Atwood's work, and also seemed an apt metaphor for the collusive relationships she dramatizes.

[7]See Jane Flax's article " The Conflict Between Nurturance and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships and Within Feminism."

[8]Hilde Bruch, *Eating Disorders*. See Chapter 4 "Hunger Awareness and Individuation," pp. 44-65.

[9]Lawrence Hatterer, *The Pleasure Addicts: The Addictive Process—Food, Sex, Drugs, Alcohol, Work, and More*, p. 18.

[10]See Orbach's discussion of fat and its relation to a sense of female boundaries, pp. 78-80.

[11]See Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic;* also *The Female Gothic* edited by Juliann Fleenor.

[12]See Margot Northey's *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction.* Northey identifies "a dark band of gothicism" in Canadian fiction and seeks to classify Canadian novels according to Gothic or grotesque types: psychological Gothic, sociological Gothic, sportive grosteque, etc. See also Sybil Korft Vincent's article "The Mirror and the Cameo: Margaret Atwood's Comic/Gothic Novel, *Lady Oracle.*"

[13]See the introduction to *Loving with a Vengeance.*

[14]Both Modleski and Russ see these fears forming a "core of truth" for women readers. According to Russ, "In one way the Gothics are a kind of justified paranoia: people *are* planning awful things about you; you *can't* trust your husband (lover, finance); everybody's motives *are* devious and complex, only the most *severe* vigilance will enable you to snatch any happiness from the jaws of destruction" (681). Modleski acknowledges this core of truth as central to any paranoid delusion, but insists the appeal of modern Gothics goes beyond this (61).

[15]Joanna Russ outlines the stock conventions of modern Gothics.

[16]This is the phrase the narrator of *Surfacing* uses when she realizes she plays a part in her own victimization (190).

[17]Nora Foster Stovel's article "Reflections on Mirror Images: Doubles and Identity in the Novels of Margaret Atwood" provides an extended analysis of this section of the novel.

[18]This quote from Dinnerstein is applicable to the relationship between Joan and her mother:

> So long as the first parent is a woman, then, woman will inevitably be pressed into the dual role of indispensable quasi-human supporter and deadly quasi-human enemy of the human self. She will be seen as naturally fit to nurture other people's individuality; as the born audience in whose awareness other people's subjective existence can be mirrored; as the being so peculiarly needed to conform to other people's worth, power, significance that if she fails to render them this service, she is a monster, anomalous and useless. And at the same time she will also be seen as the one who will not let other people be, the one who beckons her loved ones back from

> selfhood, who wants to engulf, dissolve, drown, suffocate them as autonomous persons. (110-111)

[19]Joanna Russ, p. 669.

[20]Jane Flax, p. 179. Flax cogently outlines the difference in the ways boys and girls perceive the infantile separation from their mothers under patriarchy. For males, the trauma of maternal separation is mitigated by the knowledge that other women will be available to nurture them. Women must give up infantile bonding more completely. If men look for their lost mothers in their wives, it makes sense that women wish for a mother in their husbands. Patriarchy, however, militates against women finding nuturing men.

[21]Rosowski, p. 207.

[22]Linda Sandler in interview with Margaret Atwood, p.14.

[23]See Sybil Korft Vincent's discussion of the psychology of humour in *Lady Oracle*, pp. 162-63.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Margaret Atwood has been criticized for being too clever, too pessimistic, and too anti-men. In responding to her critics, Atwood sometimes counters with anger and sometimes with with humour. Asked about her response to the media images of herself, Atwood responds: ". . . a political image is invented by other people for their own convenience. They need a figurehead or a straw person to shoot down" (Sandler, 8). Implicit in this response is an understanding of human motivation and a critical insight into the workings of systems of thought.

That Atwood is a highly political and moral writer is, by now, virtually axiomatic. Atwood has said in interview: "What's important to me is how human beings ought to live and behave" (Sandler, 27). Yet, the moral imperative implied here is misleading when one examines Atwood's work. Rather than imposing prescriptions, Atwood's intention is to represent what she sees. In *Second Words*, a collection of Atwood's literary criticism and essays, she says:

> I feel that in order to change any society,
> you have to have a fairly general consciousness
> of what is wrong—or at least that *something*
> is wrong—among the members of the society;
> call it 'consciousness raising' if you like
> an examination of the effects of the situation on
> the heads of those in the society. . . . In other
> words: to fight the Monster, you have to know that

> there is a Monster, and what it is like (both in its external and internalized manifestations). (147)

Art, for Atwood, is a mirror that shows what *is*, not what *should be*. Her distrust of utopian ideology is clear in her remarks in interview with Linda Sandler: "What do you do if somebody doesn't buy your ideal society? You end up shooting people. What kind of ideal is that?" (Sandler, 27).

Characterizing herself as a realist rather than a pessimist, Atwood says: "What you think is pessimistic depends very largely on what you think is out there in the world" (*Second Words*, 349). In her first three novels, Atwood shows how what is "out there in the world" (manifestations of "the Monster") is internalized by individuals. The "Monster" is not always overtly grotesque. In each of her first three novels, it is framed by the pastiche of the mass-media environment—a depthless, dehistoricized mirror of images that form an ongoing discourse that shapes what it means to be masculine and feminine in contemporary culture.

We become what we consume, and Atwood's dramatization of the politics of food consumption mirrors, in part, the politics of ideological internalization. In exploring the politics of cultural consumption, it is clear that Atwood is fascinated by what Fredric Jameson calls "the 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch" (Jameson, 58)—advertising, mass-market "airport" paperback fiction, comic books, Hollywood movies, and so on. (Given Atwood's fascination with popular culture, it is surprising that television does not appear more in her work.) Atwood is also fascinated by fairy tales and myth, as evidenced by recurring fairy tale and mythic

symbols and motifs in her work. Atwood creates characters who, fed on a steady diet of so-called "escapist" fantasy, are shown as starved, bloated, or pastiche cariactures.

Concerned that people have become mesmerized and automated by what they see in the mirror of popular culture, Atwood exaggerates and distorts the mirror in order to shock, to defamiliarize, and to provoke change. Naming what she does as closer to caricature than to satire, Atwood points out that satire requires a common recognition of what is outrageous in order for that audience to properly deconstruct the satirist's intentions (Sandler, 24-25). Recognizing that ours is a society in which what happens in reality far outdoes fiction in its demonic imagination, Atwood sees satire as difficult to successfully carry off. Nevertheless, she shares the satirist's strong impulse to provoke re-vision.

The ambiguous endings of Atwood's first three novels do not solve the protagonists' problems or provide ways out of their complicitous and compulsive behaviour. The paradigm of consumption and its economic, pysiological, and cultural imperatives will continue to shape what they do and who they are. Counteracting the politics of consumption with the mirror of her art, Atwood shapes for us a politics of perception, the manifesto of which Atwood describes in *Survival*: "Even the things we look at demand our participation, and our commitment: if this participation and commitment are given, what can result is a 'jail-break,' an escape from our old habits of looking at things, and a 're-creation,' a new way of seeing, experiencing and imaging—or imagining—which

we ourselves have helped to shape" (246). Atwood's first three novels urge a re-vision in order to shape new politics of perception.

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